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COLLECTOR'S EDITION

# HITLER'S BLACK GUARD

## THE



**Killer elite:** The SS slaughtered countless numbers of civilians



**Hitler Youth:** Young boys were brainwashed to kill for the Führer



**Lebensborn:** SS boss Himmler's programme kidnapped Aryan children



MINUTE-BY-MINUTE COVERAGE – AS HISTORY HAPPENED



## »» The hate brigade

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In March 1943, the Italian resistance movement initiated an assault against a SS police force in Rome and 50 Germans were killed. The response was swift: 335 Italians were picked at random and executed in caves outside the city. A bloody trail followed the SS – not least among its military wing, the Waffen-SS – on the battlefields from Normandy to Caucasus. The organisation, established as Hitler's personal bodyguards, has a reputation

for being one of history's most brutal, responsible for countless massacres of civilians and captured enemies in occupied territories. Its indifference to human life derives from the fact the SS believed itself to be an elite race of superhumans. The criteria for entering the Waffen-SS was tough, and only pure-bred Aryans were admitted. Read the harsh story of the Waffen-SS – the Nazi Stormtroopers – a story that must never be forgotten.



*Heinrich Himmler  
was the head of the SS  
from 1929 to 1945.*





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# 1939

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## World War II breaks out

For a long time Adolf Hitler had threatened Nazi Germany's neighbouring countries. Austria and Czechoslovakia were taken without a fight, but it would not be as easy with Poland. The country was bigger and had also received pledges of support from both France and Britain.



## KEY EVENTS IN 1939

JANUARY

**25TH JANUARY:**  
Franco's troops occupy Barcelona in Spain.

FEBRUARY

**15TH MARCH:**  
Germany occupies Prague. The areas of Bohemia and Moravia become German protectorates.

MARCH

**22ND MARCH:**  
Germany annexes the Baltic Sea port of Klaipeda in Lithuania.

APRIL

**7TH APRIL:** Germany, Italy, Japan and Spain sign the Anti-Comintern Pact directed against the Soviet Union. Italy invades Albania.

MAY

**28TH MARCH:**  
Madrid surrenders to Franco and the Spanish Civil War is over.

JUNE

SZ-Photo/IBL







Hitler arriving in Danzig (now Gdansk) on 19th September, 1939.

# Hitler had planned the war during the 1920s

● Adolf Hitler was born and raised in Austria. As a young man, he tried to become an artist, but couldn't make a good living from it. During some periods he lived on the streets in Vienna before he joined the German army when World War I broke out in 1914.

After the war, he was recruited by the police in Munich. His task was to infiltrate and report on

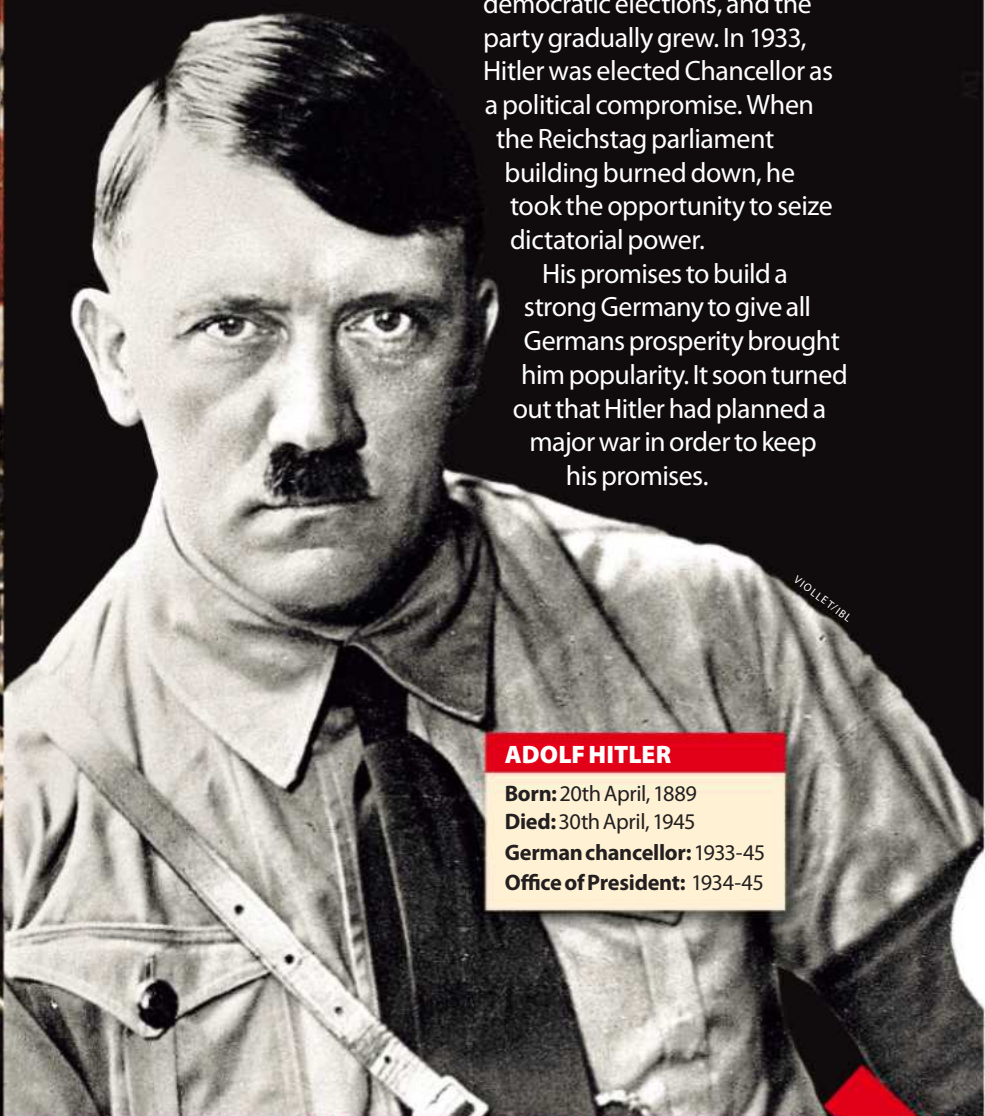
one of the city's extreme right-wing groups. It ended when Hitler took over as party leader. In 1923, he led the failed Beer Hall Putsch and was sentenced to a term in prison. There

he wrote the book *Mein Kampf* about how Germany should take Lebensraum (living space) in Eastern Europe. He also blamed the Jews for the defeat in WWI.

Hitler's Nazis stood in democratic elections, and the party gradually grew. In 1933, Hitler was elected Chancellor as a political compromise. When the Reichstag parliament building burned down, he took the opportunity to seize dictatorial power.

His promises to build a strong Germany to give all Germans prosperity brought him popularity. It soon turned out that Hitler had planned a major war in order to keep his promises.

## "GERMANY SHOULD TAKE LEBENSRAUM"



### ADOLF HITLER

**Born:** 20th April, 1889

**Died:** 30th April, 1945

**German chancellor:** 1933-45

**Office of President:** 1934-45

JULY

AUGUST

SEPTEMBER

OCTOBER

NOVEMBER

DECEMBER

#### 23 AUGUST:

Germany and the Soviet Union sign the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and agree to divide Poland between them.

#### 1ST SEPTEMBER:

Germany invades Poland and annexes Danzig.

#### 3 SEPTEMBER:

Britain, France, Australia and New Zealand declare war on Germany.

#### 6TH OCTOBER:

the fighting in Poland ceases.

#### 17TH SEPTEMBER:

the Soviet Union invades eastern Poland.

#### 30TH NOVEMBER:

the Soviet Union invades Finland.



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

#### 17TH DECEMBER:

the German battleship *Graf Spee* is scuttled off the coast of Uruguay.



BUNDESARCHIV



*The straight rows of black uniforms evoked adulation during the Nazi party's annual meetings in Nuremberg.*

ULLSTEIN BILD

## Responsible: Heinrich Himmler

**Birthplace:** Munich, son of a Catholic school inspector.

**Crime:** Member of the Nazi party since 1923. SS-Reichsführer, leader of regiments incl. Waffen-SS and death squads (Einsatzgruppen). German Interior Minister and Chief of Police responsible for the Gestapo and concentration camps.

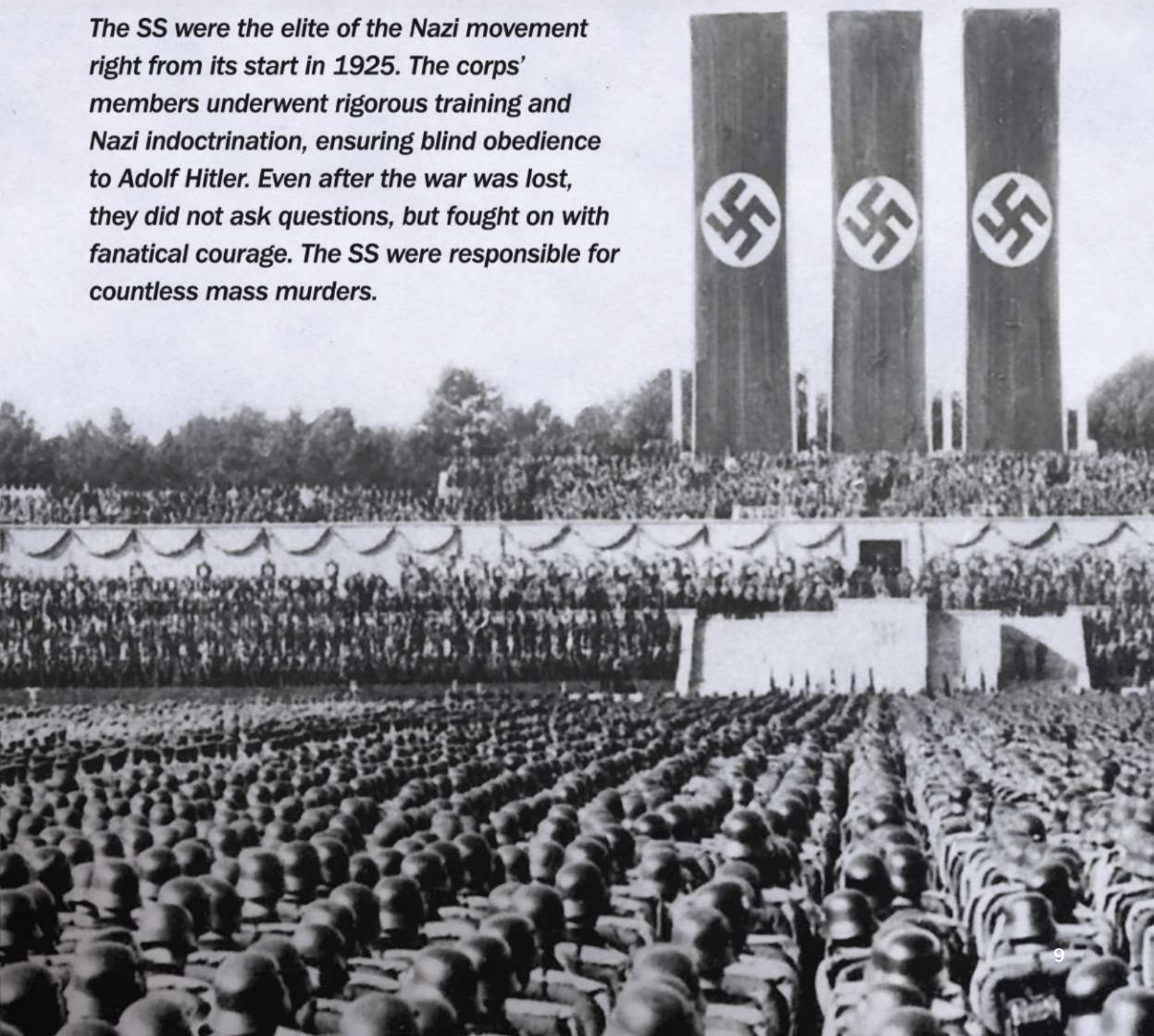
**Fate:** Committed suicide in a British prison on 23 May 1945.





# HITLER'S BLACK GUARD

*The SS were the elite of the Nazi movement right from its start in 1925. The corps' members underwent rigorous training and Nazi indoctrination, ensuring blind obedience to Adolf Hitler. Even after the war was lost, they did not ask questions, but fought on with fanatical courage. The SS were responsible for countless mass murders.*







*In late April 1945, large parts of Berlin were captured by The Red Army. Hitler hoped for a German counterattack.*

SCANPIX/CORBIS

**B**erlin, 22 April, 1945: Hitler is in the Führerbunker in Berlin's city centre, as The Red Army clamps a ring of steel around the German capital. Hitler's only hope is SS General Felix Steiner, who stands with his 11th SS Panzer Army north of the city with orders to repel the Russians.

But Steiner knows it is an impossible task. His Panzer Army exists only on paper – he does not have enough men and those he does have are exhausted and lack equipment. He has explained all this via a crackly phone line, just before Hitler's generals gather for the afternoon staff meeting in the Führerbunker. Hitler is completely taken aback by the painful truth: "That was an order!" he roars in an impotent rage. "Everyone has lied to me!"

As the attack subsides, Hitler must acknowledge that the war is about to be lost. No one can save him. Berlin's defences consist only of 45,000 war-weary soldiers and 40,000 conscripted civilians – boys and old men – in the so-called Volkssturm (People's Storm).

Steiner's refusal of Hitler's order marks a watershed. Not only was he one of Hitler's most trusted and successful generals who always got results on the battlefield, Steiner had also helped shape the Waffen-SS – Hitler's personal army, loyal to the

death – which had been founded 20 years earlier.

## **Hitler wanted loyal bodyguards**

From the very beginning, the Nazi Party (NSDAP) ruled over a corps of thugs for riot control in the tumultuous years after World War I. The Sturmabteilung (SA) – "Stormtroopers" or "brown shirts" – were recruited from among party members, who were willing to fight against the country's communists.

As Hitler languished in prison, convicted of the failed Beer Hall Putsch in 1923, the SA's numbers escalated rapidly from 2,000 to 30,000 men. Hitler was impressed – but also afraid that the SA would threaten his power.

He, therefore, asked his chauffeur, Julius Schreck, to rally a personal bodyguard – a Schutzstaffel (SS): "A unit consisting of no more than 10 men and one officer is to be chosen in each of the German provinces. The men should be specially selected. Only those with good physique and a clean criminal record should be considered," Hitler instructed.

Of utmost importance was that the SS troops personally declared

their undying loyalty to Hitler. The oath, introduced a few years later, went: "I swear to you, Adolf Hitler, Führer and Chancellor of the German Empire, loyalty and bravery. I swear to you and the leaders, designated by you, obedience to the death. So help me God".

In 1925, the Schutzstaffel or "protection squadron" was ready. During party meetings and election campaigns the

*Officer Felix Steiner was assigned the task of making the SS into a powerful army.*

SCANPIX/CORBIS





guard of faithful soldiers was to protect Hitler with their lives. Among its first members were Rudolf Hess, Hermann Göring and Heinrich Himmler – men who would have a decisive influence on the Nazi Party and the Third Reich.

### Threat from the Stormtroopers

Four years later, Heinrich Himmler was named “SS-Reichsführer” and was, thus, leader of the then 280 SS troops. Himmler wanted to create a “National Socialist Paramilitary Order” of Nordic men who would “follow any orders from the Führer unconditionally”. Formally, however, the SS was subordinate to the SA Stormtroopers, who worked actively against the SS's growth and influence.

When Hitler took power in Germany in 1933, the SA had more than 400,000 members. Moreover, due to its sheer size, the SA had become an independent force in the Nazi Party; SA leader Ernst Röhm had political ambitions and wanted opportunities to use his power. In 1934, for example, he proclaimed that the SA should merge with the army – with him as leader.

Hitler decided the SA must be stopped. During the “Night of the Long Knives”, he ordered a number of senior SA members arrested (see page 16). They were taken away under the supervision of two high-ranking SS members – Sepp Dietrich, later head of the SS Division Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler, and Theodor Eicke, head of the SS Division Totenkopf.

With the SA out of the way, the SS could finally develop. But the German army – the Wehrmacht – was still entitled to a majority of the recruits, impeding the SS' chances for growth.

### The SS becomes an armed force

During the 1930s, the SS went from being a group of handpicked bodyguards to a complex organisation – an independent army, a sizable bureaucracy and, eventually, even a business profiting from slave labour in the concentration camps.

Right at the top of this structure was Heinrich Himmler, spreading SS' power and influence wherever he could.

He created an entire universe around his organisation, which was integrated into the party's history and provided an independent “ideology”, built on medieval mysticism, Viking mythology and Himmler's own theories of race.

The mighty SS-Reichsführer was, however, far from being the brave Germanic warrior who, in his imagination, defended the German master race against Jews, Bolsheviks, homosexuals and other sub-humans; Himmler was physically weak and had not participated in World War I.

In 1936, Himmler's power extended to the German police, who were to secure Germany against internal enemies along with the SS, while the Wehrmacht was to defend its borders. Again the armed wing of the SS – the Waffen-SS – played an insignificant role. Before World War II, Hitler had no clearly defined opinion of the Waffen-SS, though he attributed great value to military service – vital if the SS was to be respected among citizens, who were hardened and brutalised by war:

“In our future Reich, the SS and police will have only the necessary authority in relation to the citizens, if it is of military character. From their experience of large military exploits and their training with the NSDAP, the German people have acquired a warrior's mentality to such an extent that the Weimar-era's fat, jovial police officer (the 1920s, ed.) will no longer be able to exercise authority,” predicted Hitler. “It is, therefore, necessary that our SS and police are at the front and that they experience bloody sacrifice to the same extent as any other part of the defence forces,” he stated.

### “Sweat saves blood”

The Waffen-SS fought alongside the Wehrmacht in World War II, but the two organisations were fundamentally different: the SS was a fraction of the size of the army and it was quite young with a strong Nazi organisation, whereas the Wehrmacht had deep, historical traditions. Their cadets also came from different walks of life. The army attracted well-educated men from the cities, while the SS obtained its future officers from the country; their inferior education made them more susceptible to indoctrination, and they were used to harsh conditions, which was an advantage at the front.

In July 1935, the SS-RSHA (the SS's head office) was established with the task of organising all divisions of the SS. Thus, a new inspectorate was also set up to monitor military training ▶



*The SS Honour Ring with runes and skull was to bestow special abilities.*

## Himmler founded an SS religion

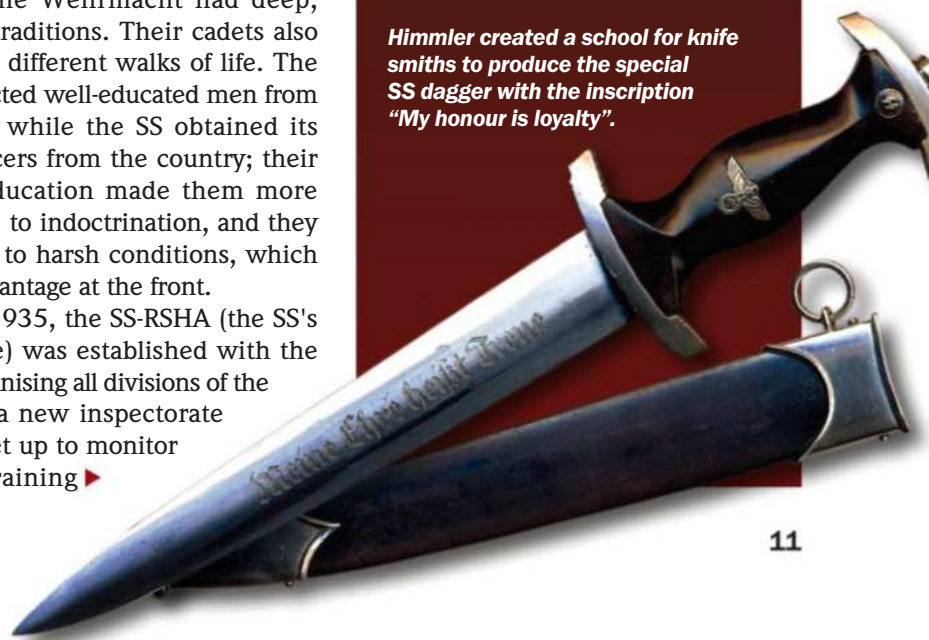
Wewelsburg Castle was decorated as a shrine for Nazi SS soldiers.

Heinrich Himmler was deeply fascinated by pagan and Nordic mythology. Some believe he saw himself as a spiritual reincarnation of Henry I of Germany, who had defended German territories against the Slavs in the 900s. Himmler saw the invasion of the Soviet Union as a continuation of Henry I's policy.

Himmler leased Wewelsburg Castle in Paderborn as early as 1934. His “National Socialist Paramilitary Order” was to have its religious centre there and the castle was rebuilt accordingly. In the crypt was a cult room, and a “black sun” (three interwoven swastikas) was embedded into the floor of the Generals' Hall.

Uniforms and weapons were decorated with runes and medieval symbols as per Himmler's wishes – including the SS honour ring, which Himmler believed gave the wearer psychic powers. Rings from fallen bearers were to be stored in a chest at Wewelsburg.

*Himmler created a school for knife smiths to produce the special SS dagger with the inscription “My honour is loyalty”.*





## Himmler amassed enormous power

Heinrich Himmler was born in 1900 and joined the Nazi party (NSDAP) as a 23 year-old. His career in the party's Bavarian branch advanced rapidly and in 1929 he was appointed SS-Reichsführer (Leader of the SS), which at that time was merely a sub-branch of the SA ("Stormtroopers").

After Hitler's takeover in 1933 Himmler controlled the German police and intelligence SD. From then until 1945, he built up a comprehensive control and power apparatus that extended to the German Reich's furthest reaches.

- **SS:** The organisation became independent in 1934, growing rapidly under Himmler's leadership. The military wing (Waffen-SS) commanded 38 divisions. Other SS Divisions ran the concentration camps and committed genocide.
- **RSHA:** Aka Reichssicherheitshauptamt (headquarters for national security). Via RSHA Himmler controlled the security police (Sipo), the intelligence service SD, the criminal police and the secret state police, the Gestapo.
- **The Police** were Interior Minister Himmler's responsibility.



Before Heinrich Himmler became one of Nazi Germany's most powerful men, he was a poultry farmer in Bavaria.

SCAMP/CORBIS

within the organisation. The intention was to train soldiers of the Waffen-SS to the highest possible standard.

The motto of the man commissioned to conduct the training of the Nazis' new elite army was "sweat saves blood". His name was Felix Steiner.

Steiner, who 10 years later would reject Hitler's orders to save Berlin, was convinced he could create battle-hardened, elite mobile soldiers by creating a training programme that emphasised individual responsibility and cooperation – rather than the army's follow-the-rule-thinking. Steiner was inspired by his experiences during World War I, where he had seen "battle groups" (small groups of selected soldiers trained for combat). Such groups carried out surprise attacks and created panic in the enemy's trenches.

To produce such an army, Steiner focused on his men having a good physique, a solid character and weapons training. The programme began at 06:00 and continued until late into the night, interrupted only by meals. The hard physical training meant Steiner's cadets could travel 3 km in less than twenty minutes, whilst wearing full equipment. And three times a week they had lectures in ideology, including Hitler's book *Mein Kampf*. Every third student failed this particular subject.

The principle elements of Steiner's training programme soon spread to the rest of the Waffen-SS, where officers and men treated each other as peers – in opposition to the Wehrmacht's traditional hierarchy.

### A cabin boy joins the SS

The training was hard and pushed recruits to the limits of what they could cope with – as SS soldier Wilhelm Roes recounts in his war memoirs.

As a cabin boy, Roes wanted to join the corps when he saw an SS recruiting poster: "It showed a soldier – a strong young man with a machine gun pressed against his protruding chest and a steel helmet with the SS runes on his head. His proud attitude and handsomeness impressed me. I stepped closer and read: You too can join the SS!"

As soon as Wilhelm turned 17, the minimum age for joining the SS, he volunteered. And to his father's great pride, was accepted into the prestigious SS Division Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler.

From day one, the young men were ordered on long runs and endured exhausting stays in muddy holes with their machine guns raised above their heads. Every bit of mud on a weapon was punishable with push-ups.

"The idea that I had made the biggest mistake of my life wouldn't leave me in the coming weeks. I kept thinking back to my time as a cabin boy. I had thought that life as a soldier would be better – but I was wrong," says Roes, who clearly felt the influence of his hardened instructors, several of them war veterans.

During the afternoon ideology teaching recruits could barely keep their eyes open – but they dared not do otherwise, for inattention was punished with even more push-ups.

It was precisely due to the hard training and daily helpings of abuse that recruits formed solid friendships, which helped them through the gruelling training, and lasted for the rest of the war. Sweat lost during training prevented the loss of blood during war.

### The SS enters the fight

When Germany attacked Poland on 1 September, 1939, the Waffen-SS got its first chance to prove that SS soldiers were equal participants in the war. Felix Steiner, leader of the SS Standarte Deutschland Regiment, was given the task of breaking through Polish defences in East Prussia.

The invasion of Poland was a textbook example of German Blitzkrieg tactics. Quickly and effectively, the German invaders defeated the Polish resistance – the SS, in particular, fought with great contempt for death and often at sustained significant losses.

At this point, the Waffen-SS consisted of just three divisions and was – compared with the Wehrmacht's 136 divisions – still a small organisation. During preparations for Operation Barbarossa (the 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union), the Wehrmacht grew significantly while the Waffen-SS received only 3 % of incoming recruits. But based on its promising results during the conquest of Poland, Hitler began to slowly allow an expansion of the SS – even if he dreaded the displeasure of the Wehrmacht. In March 1940, the Waffen-SS consisted of four divisions; Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler (successor unit to Hitler's original bodyguard,





*"Sweat saves blood" believed SS officer Felix Steiner, who made his recruits undergo gruelling training.*



*The hard physical training and the sparse diet of the SS barracks meant boys quickly became men, earning them a certain reputation with the young ladies.*

led by Sepp Dietrich), the Verfügungs Division (a reserve unit), the Totenkopf Division and the SS-Polizei Division. The latter two, in particular, furthered the SS' reputation for cruelty.

### **The first massacres**

The Wehrmacht remained sceptical of the Waffen-SS and its opinion that the SS was a bunch of undisciplined thugs was quickly confirmed. SS troops often fought with fierce fanaticism and a belief in their own superiority, which made them completely indifferent to other people's lives. The barracks' ideological indoctrination was working.

During the invasions of Poland, the Netherlands and Belgium, a series of attacks took place specifically aimed at Jews. Although the SS was formally subordinate to the army, Himmler insisted that only the SS themselves could judge their soldiers – and with predictable sentences – those accused received little or no punishment.

In September 1939, a Waffen-SS soldier forced 50 Polish Jews into a synagogue, where he then shot them. The soldier was court-martialled, but acquitted because – as he put it – he had acted "in irritation at the many atrocities Poles had committed against ethnic Germans in the country". As a man of the SS, he was also "particularly sensitive to the sight of Jews and their generally hostile attitude towards Germans; he had, thus, acted negligently, in a state of youthful enthusiasm".

The Waffen-SS' often deadly "enthusiasm" was not only aimed at Jews. On 26 May, 1940, a small group of soldiers from the British Royal Norfolk Regiment was occupying the village of Le Paradis in northern France. The British prevented the SS Division Totenkopf from advancing over the Lawe River: 17 Totenkopf soldiers were killed and 52 wounded. That a group of barely 100 British soldiers could slow down an entire SS division

was unbearable for SS-Obersturmführer Fritz Knöchlein. When the SS finally defeated the British, he gave orders to execute the captives. Several officers in Knöchlein's division apparently protested and some even left Totenkopf. But Himmler stood by Knöchlein, even awarding him the Iron Cross for bravery in combat, but Britain never forgot his crimes. The British tracked him down after the war and tried and hanged him in 1949. SS atrocities in the west ►



*After weeks of training and drills the big day finally arrived: recruits got their hands on weapons.*

ULLSTEIN BILD



were only a foretaste of the systematic crimes they would later commit in the east.

## Concentration camps hardened men

SS division Totenkopf excelled at bestial behaviour. Heading Totenkopf was Theodor Eicke – the man who would later execute SA leader Ernst Röhm – and as inspector of the death camps, he began to build an empire of concentration camps. The guards' brutality was given free rein and compassion for the prisoners was seen as weakness. He also demanded that his people rejected any faith other than complete loyalty to the SS Division Totenkopf. Eicke described the enemy as "a Bolshevik-Jewish sub-human, whose steely determination – unless prevented – would annihilate the German Reich. And this is to be prevented without mercy or compassion."

Totenkopf soldiers moved back and forth between the front and the concentration camps. In the camps, soldiers could treat prisoners as they wished – and many of them also appropriated small fortunes, according to an SS officer serving in the Belzec camp in eastern Poland, where 600,000 people died: "Even in death you can

recognise the families. They hold each other's hands so tightly that they're hard to separate when room has to be made in the gas chamber for the next group. The corpses – moist with sweat and urine, legs smeared with blood and excrement – are thrown outside. Children's bodies fly through the air. The Ukrainians' whips drive teams of workers. Two dozen dentists force open jaws, looking for gold. Corpses with gold to the left, corpses without to the right. Others break crowns and pull out gold teeth with pliers and hammers."

If Totenkopf soldiers were not callous at the front, they certainly were in the camps. The majority of German massacres and atrocities against civilians were committed by this SS division.

## Himmler's willing murderers

However, Totenkopf soldiers were not the worst offenders. In the occupied countries behind the Eastern Front another SS Division was present: *Einsatzgruppen*.

These death squads operated in the occupied territories and wore regular Waffen-SS uniforms, but here any resemblance to the frontline soldiers ceased. The group had security police status and recruited some of their members from the secret Gestapo police; their task was to "clean out" the conquered countries behind the advancing German army.

Each SS division was assigned an *Einsatzgruppen* during the

invasion of the Soviet Union. Burning with extreme hatred of Jews and other "inferior races" the groups embarked upon a killing spree that cost thousands of innocent Eastern Europeans their lives. The groups were often equipped with lists of Jews, intellectuals and other "enemies" of the Reich, and killing began as soon as the groups set foot in the conquered area, because the leaders were in fact competing to see how effectively they could kill.

Friedrich Jeckeln, SS leader in Riga boasted that he had invented the "sardine-tin method", where the victims were lined up at the edge of a mass grave, so they fell in a straight line when they were shot. The next row could then be lined up at the grave's edge. According to Jeckeln, this saved both unnecessary digging and space.

The *Einsatzgruppen* also received men transferred from other SS divisions for violating the rules. According to Georg Kepler, commander of the SS Division Das Reich, even petty offenses could mean a stint in an *Einsatzgruppen*: "Maybe they slept or were late on watch. They were threatened with court martial and offered the alternative of serving their sentence in a *Sonderkommando*".

Soldiers discovered too late what they were being ordered to do in the "special command". And if they refused, they risked execution following a court-martial: "Those methods often turn good young men into criminals," criticised Waffen-SS commander Kepler.

SS statistics reveal that in a few short years the death squads killed 633,330 Jews in the Soviet Union alone.

## The SS is an international force

Its many new tasks resulted in the SS needing more members. However, the intake of new recruits was severely limited because the Wehrmacht had priority. So the SS had to recruit using unconventional methods.

Following the occupation of Czechoslovakia, the idea of an international SS force arose. In 1939, the SS established its first independent recruitment office in Berlin; and with German expansion into Europe, the SS began recruiting the German minority in the occupied countries – and from among Nazi sympathisers abroad. Heinrich Himmler wanted to create an international force of loyal, "purebred"



During the war, the SS had to accept younger and younger recruits.

ULSTEIN BILD & SCANPIX/CORBIS



soldiers from the Nordic and Germanic parts of the expanding German Empire: “We must attract Nordic blood and deprive our enemies of it, so Nordic and Germanic blood will never fight against us again”, opined Himmler. As a reward, the foreign SS soldiers would be offered German citizenship when victory was certain.

The Wehrmacht was stretched intensely on a number of fronts as early as 1940 – the war's first year – and, at the same time, large forces were involved in ensuring the security of the occupied territories. Although, Hitler expected the attack on the Soviet Union in 1941 to proceed quickly and smoothly – he likened it to kicking down the door of a house ready to collapse – it was clear that Germany needed more troops. So Hitler gave permission for the Waffen-SS to form a division of volunteers, the Wiking.

### Steiner heads the Wiking

The man appointed to build the new SS Division Wiking was a familiar name: Felix Steiner. He had the reputation for being one of the 'Waffen-SS' most innovative commanders, and Hitler himself greatly appreciated his ability “to get the task done”.

Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels wrote in his diary of Steiner: “He is energetic and focused, attacking his work with great zeal”. After the invasion of Poland and the Battle of France, Steiner received the Knight's Cross, the highest award for bravery in Nazi Germany.

As expected Steiner tackled the task with great enthusiasm, creating the Wiking based on three regiments: the Dutch-Flemish regiment Westland, the Danish-Norwegian Nordland and the predominantly German Germania, which was moved from the SS-Verfügung Division.

The newly formed division quickly showed its worth on the battlefield. It is quite significant that Wiking received more iron crosses than Totenkopf, but the smallest of the “foreign legion armies” was motivated by Heinrich Himmler's promise of German citizenship. Their primary driving force was adventure combined with a violent hatred of communism.

Once again Steiner illustrated with Wiking how unlike most military commanders he was. His idea ►



**SS Division Handschar consisted of about 17,000 Bosnian Muslims. The division was named after an Arab scimitar.**

ULLSTEIN BILD

## Every second SS soldier was a foreigner

**The fighting on the Eastern Front helped the Waffen-SS greatly. Himmler found thousands of new soldiers in Denmark and other occupied countries.**

Immediately after Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union on June 22, 1942, the Danish Government stated its support for his struggle against communism: “Germany has now turned its weapons against the East in a battle against a power, which for years has been a threat to the Nordic States' welfare.”

At the same time, the Government allowed Danish soldiers to join the newly created “Free Corps Denmark” – a Danish corps of the Waffen-SS. About 9,000 volunteered – many of them soldiers from the Danish army, who were frustrated by the defeat in 1940.

Others went to fight communism or seek adventure.

More than 15 nationalities fought in the SS. Himmler wanted Germanic and Nordic recruits in particular from Denmark (9000), Norway (6,000) The Netherlands (60,000) and Belgium (43,000). Roughly 180 Swedes and 1,200 Finns signed up.

As the war went on, the need for soldiers grew enormously and recruitment became more pragmatic about 17,000 Muslims from Srebrenica were drafted. By the war's end almost every second SS soldier was a foreigner.



CORBIS

**Posters called for volunteers in the German-occupied countries to sign up to the Waffen-SS. Over 20,000 men signed up in France.**





*The Red Army advanced, but Hitler ordered a fight to the last drop of blood.*

of treating officers and men with respect had by now been perfected and the benefits were obvious: "The more sensibly, thoughtfully and sympathetically a unit is led, the greater its unity and value in combat. It is particularly due to our Nordic volunteers that I believe such leadership is absolutely critical," he stated during the war. Wiking quickly proved a

success, and so the SS began drafting other foreigners. The flow was great, but some of the new international regiments were less successful. For example, Himmler believed it was an excellent idea to recruit Bosnian Muslims. They harboured a fierce hatred of Christian Serbs, who formed an essential part of Tito's Partisans in Yugoslavia. The Muslims fought well in their homeland, but were difficult to manage and insisted on practising their faith.

By recruiting soldiers from the occupied countries, the Waffen-SS swelled to 280,000 soldiers in 1942. More divisions were added and by the war's end, the Waffen-SS accounted for 950,000 men spread over 38 divisions.

From the attack on the Soviet Union to the war's end in 1945, the Waffen-SS, with its mobile Panzer units, moved constantly across the front, where it was used to "put out fires" – to support the Wehrmacht, when the enemy was about to break through German lines.

## German attack halted

The first phase of Operation Barbarossa was a success. The Red Army was completely caught off guard when

three German Army units crossed the Soviet border on June 22, 1941. The Germans were initially received with open arms because minority groups in the Soviet regarded them as liberators. Ukrainians, Belarusians and members of the German minority enlisted in the SS.

The large Jewish community in the Ukraine and Belarus were still ignorant of the concentration camps – they were hoping for better times after years of Soviet persecution. But the Jews quickly realised that the Germans had not come to help them. When the Einsatzgruppen moved in, Jews were herded together and executed.

Hitler's Barbarossa plan was to advance rapidly towards Moscow, and for the first few months his plan seemed to be going well, but the following year the offensive came to a halt. The Battle of Stalingrad alone killed more than 150,000 German soldiers, and another 100,000 fell into Soviet captivity.

## Death on tracks

Wilhelm Roes' unit was sent east to replace fallen German soldiers. At 17 years-old and having just finished basic training in Berlin, he and his friends boarded a freight train to the Ukraine. As a trained radio operator, he was placed in a tank: "Thousands of soldiers, a kilometre long column of tanks, trucks, cars and motorbikes drove by us, tearing up the ground. We moved northeast in the direction of Kursk – following the sun. We didn't know what our mission was."

When Roes looked back and saw the endless column, he asked himself: "Who could ever hold us back?"

Those first months were like a long triumphal procession. The officers of The Red Army had no tactical insight and simply forced their men forward as cannon fodder for the German tanks.



*Many SS soldiers feared The Red Army and capture more than death. The result was unheard of bloody fighting on the German east front.*



But during the winter of 1943-44 the tables turned. The tanks froze, and the Russians learned to fight. In February, Wilhelm Roes' tank was hit and his comrade Richard was wounded: "I grabbed him under the arms and pulled, but only his upper body was moving. The blood gushed out of him. He looked at me briefly: 'Willy, it's no use,' he said in a weak voice, then his head dropped to the side. Richard was dead. The grenade had ripped off his leg."

### The SS calls up the last reserves

The Waffen-SS fought with fierce fanaticism and suffered far greater losses than the rest of the Wehrmacht. Its need for new men increased daily, and the SS had to compromise on the strict requirements of origins and "racial purity". Towards the end of the war foreigners made up about 50 % of the total force. The SS also recruited from Hitler Youth, and, consequently, 12 year-old boys fought alongside veterans.

Hitler had ordered the territories in the east defended to the last drop of blood. The order was followed because both Wehrmacht and SS soldiers were terrified at the prospect of surrendering to The Red Army; as the Germans had advanced, they had not spared anyone – and they feared revenge in defeat.

But Germany had neither the manpower nor the equipment to hold its position. Now it was about getting away – making it to the western front and surrendering to the British or Americans, who kept their captives in far better conditions.

Many soldiers, therefore, disguised themselves with regular Wehrmacht uniforms, hoping not to be discovered. Unfortunately, all SS members had to have their blood-type tattooed on their upper left arm. The tattoo, which had saved lives at the front when doctors had to give a blood transfusion, now revealed the soldiers as members of a criminal organisation.

SS members fled from across the entire front, their willingness to sacrifice themselves abandoned in favour of survival. Roes experienced the last weeks of the war in a daze. His companions had stolen a barrel of alcohol, which they had poured into their canteens. He realised the war was over in May, and disguised himself with a Luftwaffe uniform, so he could slip home to his family unchallenged,

but even then he did not find peace. For several months he had to live underground like a wanted criminal: "Imagine that you've been a member of your country's elite unit. You have starved, been frostbitten. And then you hear your mayor say: Only when the SS are dangling from the trees, will it be better for us!"

*SS General Felix Steiner was acquitted of war crimes, became a writer, and lived until 1966. Theodor Eicke died on the Eastern*

*Front in 1943. Sepp Dietrich received a life sentence, but he was pardoned in 1955. SS soldier Wilhelm Roes spent several months as a POW and ran a radio business in West Germany. In 2005 he published his memoirs (with his grandson Jörn Roes).* ■

### LEARN MORE

● Gordon Williamson: **The SS – Hitler's Instrument of Terror**, Barnes & Noble, 2006 ● Alan Clark: **Barbarossa**, Cassell & Co., 2002 ● Jörn Roes: **Freiwillig in den Krieg**, Edition Q, 2005



*A member of an SS Einsatzgruppen executes a Polish Jew, whilst the rest of the death patrol looks on.*

## Cruelty without limits

**The SS systemised the mass murder of Jews, Gypsies and other non-Aryan races. Concentration camp guards were assembled into death squads, *Einsatzgruppen*, and sent to the Eastern Front to cleanse it.**

**T**he Schutzstaffel's (SS) basic mission was to provide Adolf Hitler with personal security, but under Heinrich Himmler it became one of history's most brutal and murderous organisations.

The Waffen-SS, the military wing of the SS, consisted primarily of soldiers who fought at the front, while the systematic mass murder of Jews and other "sub-humans" was performed by other SS divisions.

The feared Einsatzgruppen – death squads, which consisted of hardened guards from concentration camps – were posted on the Eastern Front. The squads' task was to cleanse Eastern Europe and Russia of Jews and

communists. Himmler predicted that 30 million people in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union were eliminated in order to make room for Germans.

The death squads often used local anti-Semites, for example, in the Ukraine, where local volunteers found victims and carried out the murders. These volunteers were then executed by the SS, who wanted to erase all traces of the crime.

The SS was responsible for the murder of six million Jews, many thousands of Poles and Russians, 500,000 Gypsies, 100,000 disabled people and thousands of homosexuals and members of the Jehovah's Witnesses.



Kampfblatt der national-sozialistischen Bewegung

Oben

Stabschef





*Ernst Röhm and Adolf Hitler were old comrades. Röhm was the only one allowed to use “du” with Hitler and he was not in the least bit afraid of him.*

POLFOTO/ULLSTEIN BILD

Ernst Röhm

### Responsible: Adolf Hitler

**Birthplace:** Braunau, Austria, the son of a customs officer.

**Crime:** Head of the German Nazi Party since 1921, which commands the bullying SA corps and the intelligence service. After taking power in 1933, he becomes the German dictator and army commander.

**Fate:** Commits suicide with Eva Braun in Berlin on April 30, 1945.

Name: Adolf Hitler  
Date: 20. April 1889



Lutze must report that Ernst Röhm is completely out of control. Röhm, leader of the volunteer Nazi band of thugs, the SA – Sturmabteilung – is dissatisfied with Hitler's policy, which he believes has been too lax in relation to National Socialism's original ideals. Röhm is talking about revolution, and recently he has called Hitler “a ludicrous corporal” recounts Lutze. He then lowers his voice to a whisper as he quotes Ernst Röhm's most heretical words: “Hitler is a traitor. We must send him on a long holiday.” Hitler stares into

space. His old friend Röhm is standing in his way. Major industry leaders will not cooperate with the Nazis as long Röhm is prattling on about revolution. And the common German is getting tired of the violent SA's mayhem in the streets. Hindenburg, the ageing president is marked for death. If Hitler hopes to take over after him – and thereby seize all power – he must kill Röhm.

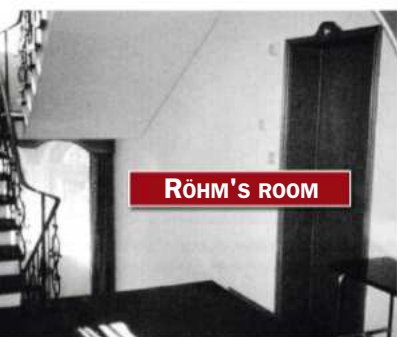
It won't be easy. Röhm is more than just a dangerous rival. He is an old friend and comrade. He and the four million “brown ▶

**\* “Night of the long knives” is an old expression for incapacitating one's enemies – and is, thus, older than the SA purges of 1934. In Germany, it referred to the bloody events such as the “Röhm-Putsch” (The Röhm coup) or Operation Hummingbird.**





Hitler wearing a flying helmet, prior to the flight to Munich, where the fight against the SA was to happen.



Hitler personally confronted Röhm in front of this door with a loaded gun in his hand.

ZEITGESCHICHTLICHES BILDARCHIV

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shirts" may still be useful: "We must let the matter develop," says the Führer thoughtfully.

**30 June 1934, 02:00**



**Hitler flies to Munich, where an SA group are supposedly rioting in the streets.**

It is a cloudless summer night. Far beneath the aeroplane, German cities shine, little patches of glowing light. The rivers shimmer like ribbons of silver running through the countryside. Every so often the weather is reported over the scratchy radio; the pilot's calm voice, announcing the cities they pass, is barely audible over the noise of the engine. He points out of the window: Potsdam, Leipzig, Regensburg.

As is his habit, Hitler is sitting in the co-pilot's seat. He is wearing a flying helmet, the collar of his leather coat up around his ears. The Chancellor is silent, gazing thoughtfully into the night. The last day and night have been long and marked by difficult decisions, and a new day is dawning. Decision day.

The SA – his once-faithful Stormtroopers – has taken to the streets of Munich in protest. His closest advisers say a coup is under way. Ernst Röhm has betrayed him. In Berlin the old parties gather to plot: the nobility, the rich, the old generals, all those who do not support him and his ideas about the New Germany. All those who want to wrest back power from him. If he wants to keep his grip on Germany – his Germany – he has to act now.

**02:30, Kaufering near Munich**

**Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler SS soldiers, Hitler's personal elite corps, are ready to take action against the SA.**

Dazed soldiers get onto their feet, straightening their slept-in black uniforms. They put on their boots and form rank.

Gruppenführer Sepp Dietrich briefs them on the situation. He speaks earnestly and in short sentences. Obedience is required. Traitors must be eliminated, no matter who they are.

The leaders of the SA are a nest of pain and sin, he says with an ill-concealed nod to Röhm's and other SA leaders' well-known homosexuality. The Leibstandarte must cleanse it, defend Germany's honour and protect Hitler.

"Heil Hitler," answer the men with one voice, raising their right arms in the German greeting.

The faces under the heavy, black steel helmets with SS runes are dogged, resolute. Silently, the men climb into the trucks waiting ready outside.

Dietrich regards them, a small smile pulling at his mouth. Now he is going to get revenge on his rivals in the SA.

**Munich, 05:00**

**In the Ministry of Internal Affairs it is clear that the SA riots are over.**

In reality, the "riots" were nothing more than a small demonstration, with some of the SA shouting anti-Hitler comments. But propaganda minister, Josef Goebbels, and SS leader, Heinrich Himmler, have stirred up the issue by talking of a "coup" and Hitler is simmering with rage. He orders the SA's Gruppenführer Schmidt to present himself.

The group leader has scarcely entered the office on the third floor before Hitler is upon him. Enraged, he grabs hold of Schmidt's distinctions, wrenching them from the uniform.

"You are under arrest! Traitor! You will be shot!" sputters Hitler into the face of the astonished Gruppenführer.

In the background Goebbels looks on with a stiff smile. Hitler's words hang in the air as Schmidt is taken away to Stadelheim prison.

**Hanselbauer Hotel in Bavaria, 06:30**

**Hitler has called SA leaders to a meeting at midday, while the entire SA Corps is on leave. After celebrating the forthcoming holiday the SA are sleeping it off.**

At the entrance to the small town of Bad Wiessee, Sepp Dietrich and his SS troops are waiting for Hitler and his retinue. Together they drive to the Hotel Hanselbauer. In the early dawn everything is closed and turned off and the windows are shuttered. The SS officers wave their troops into position by means of gestures. Only birdsong breaks the silence around the white building.

Hitler stands in front of the main door with a gun in his hand, and bedlam breaks loose. The door is kicked in, and soldiers storm up and down the stairs again and again. They shove frightened maids aside. Cries and screams pierce the air. An SA soldier runs half-naked down a corridor, pursued by roaring SS troops.

When the door to one of the most prominent officer's room is kicked in, two men are found together in bed. The SA officer is enjoying the company of a young private. After a hard blow, the SS officer hits the floor.

"I haven't done anything! Help me. I haven't done anything!" shouts the SA man, distraught, as he is dragged out of the room.

Everyone is silent in the corridor for a moment. Hitler is standing in front of Ernst Röhm's room with his gun in his hand. Decisively, he knocks at the door.

"Who's there?" asks Röhm, still half asleep, through the thin door.

Hitler says his name. Röhm opens the door and the Führer rushes in.

"Are you here already?" asks Röhm, gawping; the only person in the Nazi movement



who insists on using “du” to Hitler. The Führer responds with a litany of charges.

Röhm is naked to the waist. He is red and his face is bloated from too much alcohol and too little sleep. The scar on his cheek is obvious on his burly face. Now fully awake, he begins to defend himself, but quickly realises that Hitler is not listening. Hitler is already on the way down the hall to take care of other matters.

**Munich Central Station, morning**  
**In an ambush on the roads, the SS captures some SA leaders, who were on their way to the meeting. Now the SS turns to the city's central station.**

With the SS swarming around him, Hitler storms down the platform, past the astonished travellers. The SS check every passenger, every time a train arrives. When the train from Berlin comes in, they jump onto its running board, stomp through the train's corridors and open the doors to every compartment. Any SA members they encounter follow willingly, believing that they are being escorted to the meeting with Hitler. Only when they are sitting in the cars, surrounded by fierce, black-clad SS troops, do they suspect anything. Too late.

**Munich, 10:00**  
**Hitler settles a personal score.**

Gustav Ritter von Kahr's doorbell rings. Von Kahr is still wearing a dressing gown. He is an elderly gentleman of 73 years, living a quiet life and staying completely out of public view.

More than 10 years ago – 1923 – he was one of Bavaria's most powerful men, powerful enough to stop Hitler's Beer Hall Putsch, which ended with the coup-plotters being made fools of, and Hitler being thrown in jail. Now he will atone for that. Three men drag him away. No one sees von Kahr alive again.

**“The Brown House”, 10:00**  
**The Propaganda Minister pulls the strings from the city's Nazi Party headquarters.**

Joseph Goebbels lifts the handset and asks to be put through to Hermann Göring, Minister President of Prussia and one of the Nazi Party's most influential men. When Göring answers in Berlin, Goebbels says only one word: “Hummingbird”. With this code word he lets Göring know that the time has come to do away with Hitler's enemies in the capital.

**Neubabelsberg outside Berlin, 11:30**  
**Operation Hummingbird is in full swing.**  
General Kurt von Schleicher is sitting in his study, talking on the phone. Von Schleicher has been German chancellor. With his conservative ideology and belief in the old Prussian virtues,

he has a hard time coming to terms with the upstart Hitler and his new Germany.

However in this telephone conversation with one of von Schleicher's old comrades, the tone is light and easy. Through the window he can see many yachts skimming across the lake in the wealthy neighbourhood of Neubabelsberg.

Suddenly he asks to be excused – the doorbell has rung. He places the handset on the table while he goes out to see who it is. Through the handset his friend hears him say: “Yes, I am General von Schleicher.”

Then some shots are fired and there is a click as the handset is replaced.

Von Schleicher's wife also hears the shots and comes running from the dining room. She sees her husband lying on the floor. Dark red blood flows from a gunshot wound in his neck. She screams. Panicking she runs at the killers, waving her arms in front of her. The men, dressed in long raincoats, still have guns in their hands. Again shots are fired, and Mrs von Schleicher falls onto the carpet next to her dead husband.

The family's governess, who witnessed the murders through an open door, stares at the scene, petrified. While other men rummage in drawers and cupboards, a man walks over to her: “Don't worry, Miss,” he says kindly, “we won't kill you.”

**Gestapo's house in Berlin**  
**Heydrich, head of the SS security service, manages the operation.**

Reinhard Heydrich is not a man whose hands shake. Not even now, when life after life, fate after fate, is passing through his long, slender fingers. He writes a name ▶

*With his bulldog-like appearance, Ernst Röhm resembled exactly what he was: the leader of a group of thugs.*

POL/FOTO/ULLSTEIN BILD

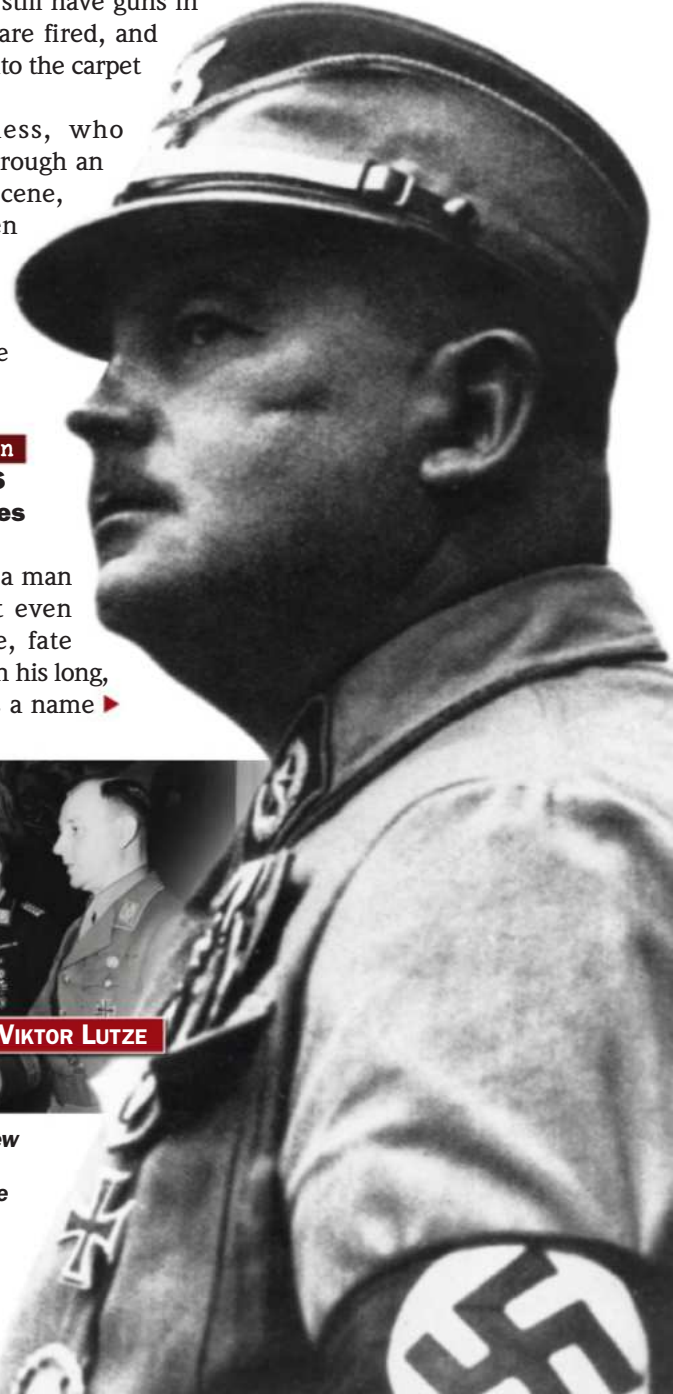


**ADOLF HITLER**

**VIKTOR LUTZE**

*Hitler looks well upon the new SA leader, Viktor Lutze, who revealed Ernst Röhm's dangerous opinions.*

POL/FOTO/ULLSTEIN BILD





and a few words on numbered cards: “arrested”, “shot” or “pending”. He sends the cards to Hermann Göring and his people so that they can follow what has happened to their former friends and allies.

Heydrich remains in his office. He orders his agents over the phone, working tirelessly, hour after hour. Collected and efficient in a crisp uniform, a tall and blond Nazi god, administrator of life and death – with the judgements neatly written on his white index cards.

## Leipziger Strasse, Berlin, lunch time Göring deals out death sentences.

The orders are simple and are given to men accustomed to obeying. “Find Klausener and kill him,” says Hermann Göring sharply to an SS-Hauptsturmführer, who promptly smacks his heels together and disappears out of the office. Livery-clad waiters carry in trays bearing Göring's lunch. Heydrich's cards with the names of men already arrested and taken to Lichterfelde barracks lie between serviettes and beer bottles.

“Shoot them! Shoot them!” barks Göring into space with a joyful expression on his face.

## Transport Ministry in Berlin, 13:00 Erich Klausener is a top government official and part of the Catholic opposition to Hitler. He has long irritated Hermann Göring.

With measured steps an SS soldier walks up the transport ministry's stairs and identifies Director Erich Klausener's office.

Just then the senior official, a serious looking middle-aged man, neatly dressed in a suit comes from the toilet in the hallway. He shudders at the sight of the black-clad SS officer and hastens to his office. From here he calls one of his colleagues on the floor above: “Could you please come right away?” asks Klausener,

his voice anxious. His colleague does not appear. The SS soldier is already in the office. He tells Klausener that he is under arrest and before the official has time to react, the SS officer shoots him through the head. Then he puts the gun in the victim's hand, picks up the phone and calls for the SS troops waiting downstairs. When Klausener's colleague eventually arrives, black-clad men are standing guard at the front door.

“The Director committed suicide. He just shot himself,” explains a distraught office clerk.

## Lichterfelde Barracks outside Berlin SA leaders are arrested and executed.

More and more men are dragged out into the courtyard. In front of a wall each of them has their shirt brutally ripped off, and a charcoal circle drawn around his left nipple.

From the windows of a basement, the other captured SA soldiers grimly watch as the SS squad, ruthlessly and systematically, shoots their comrades. The wall is sprayed with blood, but it would be meaningless to clean it now. The executions continue for the rest of the day.

## Munich, early afternoon Hitler discusses the SA leaders' fate with his closest advisers at Nazi Party headquarters “The Brown House”.

This hot afternoon in Munich is excruciating. The windows are wide open, but the air is virtually still in the high-ceilinged rooms.

Hitler paces nervously as he expostulates. A few of his people claim that they are happy to kill Ernst Röhm with their bare hands. Hitler waves them away and continues his tirade. He has already identified the servile Viktor Lutze as Röhm's successor. The Führer now dictates his wishes for future Stormtroopers to Lutze.

“SA officers must act like men, not despicable, grotesque monkeys,” he spits. “I

## Hitler's stormtroopers stood in the way

**In fact, Hitler was not interested in creating National Socialism in Germany. He would have preferred to have an understanding with the bourgeois.**

**T**he SA marked life in German cities in the 1920s and '30s with lootings, beatings and rapes. SA members were a motley bunch, often recruited from the impoverished working class, and subdued by poverty and fear of the future. The SA's brutality

helped pave the way for Hitler's assumption of power by intimidating other political groups. Furthermore, violence in the streets had citizens yearning for the peace and order, which Hitler promised.

The SA grew out of the Freikorps – right-wing radical groups that fought violently against communists and socialists.

At its formation in 1920, the SA's primary task was to protect public Nazi rallies from left-wing demonstrators.

Ernst Röhm, a World War I veteran, quickly gained a leading role in the SA and Nazi Party, which he helped build.

Röhm wanted better social conditions for the ordinary people. In his view, National Socialism should have been pronounced with equal pressure on both words. But when Hitler was elected chancellor and needed the support of industry, the army and other parts of conservative Germany, the SA stood in the way.

With the purges of 1934, Hitler effectively broke the SA, whose time as an independent power factor was now over.

**The SA and communists fought bloody street-fights in the 1930s.**





demand blind obedience from the SA – from its leaders to its humblest privates.”

His voice rises to new heights and distortions of disgust: “Champagne has been thrown out of windows in these orgies. They have thrown away the party's money. I forbid the SA to drive around in expensive cars. There will be no more diplomatic dinners.”

In the silence that follows, someone asks what to do with the arrested SA leaders, who are being held in Stadelheim prison.

“They must be shot down like dogs,” roars Hitler and grabs a piece of paper with a number of names upon it. With expansive gestures he puts a big cross next to several names and gives the list to Sepp Dietrich of the SS.

“Go straight to Stadelheim. Take six men and an officer, and make sure that these people are executed for high treason.”

Sepp Dietrich slowly reads the names. Annoyingly for Göring and the other top Nazis Ernst Röhm's name is not on the list.

“I have spared Röhm in thanks for his previous services,” says Hitler.

#### **Stadelheim Prison, late afternoon**

**Sepp Dietrich arrives and gets ready to execute the Führer's order.**

The prisoner gets to his feet at the metallic click of the lock. The SA man looks hesitantly at Sepp Dietrich, who stands in the doorway. Dietrich greets him with an outstretched arm: “The Führer has sentenced you to death for high treason. Heil Hitler!” he says flatly.

As if on signal, two SS soldiers move forward and pull the prisoner away. A few hours ago he was one of the dreaded brown shirts, spreading terror on the streets. Now he looks miserable as he is dragged along through the dreary corridors and out into the prison yard, where he will be placed with his back against a wall.

The firing squad steps out.

“By order of the Führer... Attention! Aim! Fire!” roars the commanding SS officer.

The shots resound around the prison blocks. The SA man's body moves, and he falls to the ground like a rag doll. Sepp Dietrich goes inside to get the next one, a high-ranking SA officer.

“Comrade Sepp. This is madness! We are innocent,” says the officer, desperately.

“The Führer has sentenced you to death for high treason. Heil Hitler!” replies Dietrich mechanically. He suddenly feels unwell and leaves the prison as fast as he can.

The sound of shouts and shots, tearing at the warm summer evening as dusk descends, are heard again in Stadelheim prison-yard.

#### **Hotel Adlon in Berlin, late afternoon**

**Senior officers and officials are aware that a cleansing campaign is in progress.**



At Berlin's grandest hotel, the Adlon, everything seems the same. High society comes and goes and servants are poised to meet even the most demanding wishes. As often before, government officials, diplomats and military personnel are meeting for afternoon refreshment.

To everyone's surprise General von Bredow, one of the slain General von Schleicher's closest friends, also appears: “I have no idea why the pigs have not killed me yet,” he says in answer to their questioning glares.

More come over and shake his hand – which takes courage, because everyone knows that the waiters are just as servile to the Gestapo as to visitors. A diplomat offers to go home with Bredow so he can be safe. The general quietly declines the offer: “I left home very early this morning. I would like to return now that I have had the pleasure of being with my friends again,” he says.

General von Bredow leaves a generous amount of Reichmarks as a tip to the courteous waiters, says goodbye and disappears into the crowds on Unter den Linden. A few hours later he lies dead in a pool of blood at his home.

#### **The Brown House, Munich, early evening**

**Some SA privates have slept in Nazi headquarters after the party yesterday. Now they are being held.**

Tired, sweaty, hungover and with their nerves on edge, the SA soldiers await their fates. When Hitler enters the room, cheers break loose. The Führer looks at them strictly: “Your leaders have betrayed your trust. I fought for the cause, while your officers drank the night away, lived in luxury, dined in restaurants,” he thunders. ▶

**Dozens of SA leaders are shot in the yard of Lichterfelde Barracks, 30 km outside Berlin.**

BUNDESARCHIV



**Soldiers from Hitler's SS-Leibstandarte corps happen to be photographed during...**



**... the cleansing wave, which was otherwise a top secret operation.**





*To the outside they were on the same side, but privately the rivalry between Ernst Röhm's SA and Heinrich Himmler's SS was ruthless.*

POLFOTO/ULLSTEIN BILD

The SA privates are completely silent while the meaning of these words sink in. Hitler has obviously not lost confidence in them, only in their leaders: "It is necessary for me to know if you are with me or with those who have abused your trust for personal gain. Bid the new leader, Lutze, welcome, and await my orders through him."

Viktor Lutze steps forward with an outstretched arm. "Heil Hitler!" he shouts in a shrill voice. With an energy borne of equal parts fear and relief the privates shout in reply and break into the Horst Wessel song: "Raise the flag high! Close the ranks tightly! The SA marches with calm, sure steps. Comrades and reactionaries shot by The Red Front, march in spirit with our ranks," they sing.

With arms crossed, Hitler considers the men. He will let Viktor Lutze send them home soon. They are sure to obey.

**Munich, 20:00**

**As Hitler flies back to Berlin, the radio in Munich broadcasts an official announcement from the Nazi Party.**

The radio announcer has rarely seen a text of this nature and sounds more serious than usual: "For several months, isolated elements have been trying to create a split between the SA and the state. Tonight, at 02:00, the Führer travelled to Munich and ordered the immediate dismissal and imprisonment of the most deprived persons. During the arrests such painful scenes occurred, from a moral perspective, that there was no room for pity. Some SA leaders were with young men of a different morality. One of the leaders was found in a particularly repulsive situation..." The announcer pauses: "The Führer has ordered this festering boil punctured and drained – without mercy."

The Munich inhabitants listen attentively to the shocking news in their living rooms and relax back into their upholstered armchairs. Abominable people have threatened national security, but Hitler has intervened. Thanks to his determination, they can now go reassured to bed.

**Reich Chancellery in Berlin, 13:00**

**Nevertheless, Göring has persuaded Hitler to have SA leader, Ernst Röhm, executed.**

As always, the changing of the guard in front of the Reich Chancellery in Berlin is an attraction. Even in the July heat, families with children, young and old, flock in front of the monumental building to see the soldiers march to the pompous military music.

Boot-heels smack against tiles and flags flap under the baking sun. Finally, a window on the first floor opens, and Adolf Hitler appears. He waves to the crowd. Apparently rested and calm, his black hair glistening with a newly barbered sharp parting. No one could guess that just a few minutes earlier he gave the order to the SS to kill his old friend Ernst Röhm.



**Stadelheim Prison, Munich, 14:30**

**SS officer Theodor Eicke is to execute Röhm. On Hitler's orders, however, Röhm must first be allowed to shoot himself.**

The door to cell 474 opens slowly and Theodor Eicke enters. Röhm, who is still stripped to the waist, follows him with his eyes.

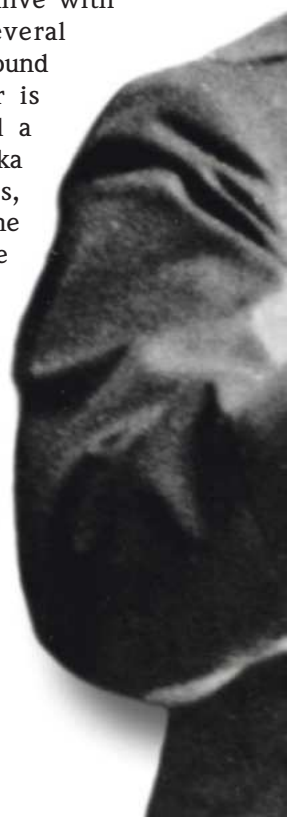
Carefully, Eicke places a copy of the party newspaper *Völkischer Beobachter* on the table. On the front is the news that Röhm has been removed as head of the SA. Beside the newspaper Eicke lays a loaded pistol. "If Adolf wants to kill me, he must do the dirty work himself," says Röhm defiantly.

Eicke, who commands the Dachau concentration camp, turns on his heel, leaving the cell without a word.

**Reich Chancellery, 14.30**

**Hitler holds a tea party.**

The Reich Chancellery is alive with voices. The chatter, in several languages, is mixed with the sound of clinking teacups. Hitler is wearing a white shirt and a uniform jacket with a swastika armband. Stiffly, he circulates, letting himself be admired. The Chancellor has considerable charisma, but one guest observes his empty gaze. The hollow laughter and mechanical movements reveal that Hitler is simply playing a role. No one else seems to notice.





**Stadelheim Prison, 14:40**

**Time has run out for Ernst Röhm. He has had his 10 minutes.**

As the door to cell 474 opens again, the SS sees Röhm sitting in the same position that they left him 10 minutes ago.

"Röhm, prepare yourself," roars Theodor Eicke.

Röhm stands up, erect and defiant, his chest protruding. The SS officer shoots. His hand shakes a little. Another shot. Röhm falls injured to the floor.

"My Führer, my Führer," he whimpers.

The third bullet ends his life.

**Reich Chancellery, a few minutes later**

**Hitler hears of Röhm's death.**

Once again, Hitler appears in the window and waves to the admiring crowd in front of the Reich Chancellery. He is then disturbed by an SS officer who hands him a piece of paper. Hitler reads the text quickly. After a few minutes he disappears into his own apartment.

*"I was the German people's supreme court judge," said Adolf Hitler in Reichstag after his mass killings.*

POL/FOTO/ULLSTEIN BILD



**The Kroll Opera, Berlin**

**Hitler speaks to parliament.**

The atmosphere is tense as Hitler steps up to the rostrum of Kroll Opera House. Since the Reichstag fire last year parliament has had to convene here. Hitler must now account for the 13 MPs, who were among those cleansed from the SA. Hitler is flanked by armed SS. In the hall 13 empty seats receive cautious glances.

Hitler begins to speak. Reich radio transmits to all of Germany. The conclusion follows a complex explanation: "Mutinies are crushed in accordance with eternal, iron laws," shouts Hitler. "If you blame me for not going to court to get their judgment, I can only say: at that moment, I was responsible for the German people's fate and was, thus, the German people's Supreme Court judge."

Applause erupts. Outside a jubilant crowd awaits. The listeners nod and agree. Hitler has the nation in the palm of his hand.

*This article is based particularly on Max Gallo's book, *The Night of the Long Knives*, based on German documents, Nuremberg Trial testimony, a White Paper on the events and eyewitnesses.* ■

**READ MORE**

• Max Gallo: *The Night of Long Knives*, Fontana, 1974 • Paul R. Maracini: *The Night of the Long Knives*, The Lyons Press, 2004 • Hans Hellmut Kirst: *The Nights of the Long Knives*, William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1976

## The murders gave Hitler complete power

**The German parliament and courts quietly accepted Hitler's purges, although legally they were one long series of serious criminal acts.**

**A**bsolute power had always been Hitler's ambition, and the purges in 1934 were the culmination of a process that began as soon as he became chancellor in January 1933. Using the arson attack on the Reichstag and a fictional communist coup plot as excuses, the German constitution was suspended and all parties other than the Nazi Party banned. Nearly a year later, Hitler took another step towards complete dictatorship. The cleansing "night of the long knives" removed all those people who stood in the

way, thereby enabling Hitler to also take over the presidency from Paul von Hindenburg, who died a month later.

Hitler used his new power to change the pledge of allegiance for German soldiers, so that – like all civil servants – they would swear allegiance to him personally. Most officers took their oath very seriously, and that prevented many of them from criticising their leader – even late in World War II, when it became apparent that Hitler was leading Germany to catastrophe. After the murders in 1934 the country was on an unescapable course towards war and genocide.



# Hitler



*In 1940 Hitler Youth had approx. 8 million members. They all received war training from childhood.*

ULLSTEIN BILD & AOP / GETTY IMAGES



# Month

## Cannon fodder for the Führer

*Hitler wanted German youth to be as tough as leather and as hard as steel from Krupp. Therefore, he forced all of the country's boys into the Hitler Youth, where millions of children were brainwashed and trained for battle. And when the war demanded it, Hitler sacrificed them without hesitation.*

**Responsible:**  
Baldur von Schirach

**Birthplace:** Berlin, grew up in Weimar, the son of a theatre director.

**Crime:** von Schirach was leader of the Nazi youth movement. He brainwashed a whole generation into soldiers.

**Fate:** In 1940 he became governor of Vienna. He deported Jews, calling it "an active contribution to European culture." Sentenced to 20 years in prison. Died in 1974.



von: Baldur Benedikt von Schirach  
Fot: 9. maj 1907



# From boy to soldier

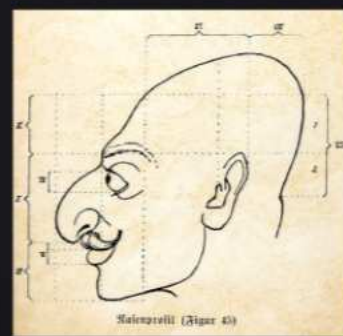
**Hitler Youth prepared boys for a future life as soldiers.**

**Hard physical training and weeklong drills were combined with weapons training and regular brainwashing.**

## Nazi race learning

The ideology of the Aryan race's superiority was explained through lectures and illustrations showing "races" and peoples divided into an intricate hierarchy: Germans at the top, Americans a little further down the list and Jews, blacks and Gypsies at the bottom of the race hierarchy.

**The Jews are sub-humans with big noses, the boys were told.**



POLFO/TOFFOTO

**H**enry Metelmann struggles through the snow. He and his fellow soldiers have been persecuted by The Red Army in the winter of 1943, which has pushed the Germans back on all fronts since the Battle of Stalingrad. It is -55 degrees. But the cold is nothing compared to the thoughts, painful as sharply pointed icicles boring into Henry's brain as he trudges along: his father was right – everything that Henry learned in the Hitler Youth is a lie. Russians are not sub-humans, and the war is honourless. Henry represents neither the master race nor Nazi

Germany's hope; no, he is cannon fodder in a senseless war.

Henry keeps his epiphany to himself. He dare not share it with anyone, and plods onwards: "We had to be careful. But the disgust was deep, and few could doubt that for years we had been filled with lies," he wrote in his autobiography, *Through Hell for Hitler*.

### The Hitler Youth is created

Henry Metelmann was not alone in falling for Hitler Youth's propaganda. In the years leading up to World War II millions of young men flocked to the Nazi Party's youth organisation. Blinded by Hitler Youth's leader Baldur von Schirach's promises of a glorious future, they donned the proud uniform and armband. Only too late did they discover that the speeches about sacrifice for Germany were not romantic platitudes, but the very purpose of their existence.

The Führer's martyr factory, the Hitler Youth, stole an entire generation's youth and sent hundreds of thousands of children and young people to their death in order to realise the Nazi dream of a "lebensraum" to the east.

No one could have foreseen this happening when the movement was founded by law student Kurt Paul Gruber. In 1922, he gathered a small group of 15-16 year old boys in his home town of Plauen, in Saxony. Gruber was an ardent Nazi and fascinated by Hitler's promises of a strong Germany based on community. Thus, Gruber put all his energy into providing the Nazi party with a strong youth organisation. With money from a local clothing manufacturer, he began a recruitment campaign, which was a great success. Within a few months, there were 2,500 members.

Hitler soon took Gruber and his association under his wing. At a large-scale party meeting in July 1926 he integrated the organisation, named Hitler Jugend Bund Deutscher

Arbeiterjugend, with the Nazi party and made Gruber its first "Reichsführer".

The Hitler Youth lived its first years in relative obscurity. From time to time, the young Nazis could be seen marching with Hitler's Stormtroopers, the SA, or distributing pamphlets or material for the Nazi party. Once in a while they were involved in mass brawls with their opponents on the political left, a primitive strength test of raw muscle power that was popular in both camps.

But a tragic incident brought the young Nazis firmly into the public eye. On January 24, 1932, Herbert Norkus, a 15 year-old Hitler Youth member from Berlin, was stabbed to death by a group of communists. Norkus received a hero's funeral with speeches, including one from Joseph Goebbels – Hitler's propaganda chief – and immediately became the youth movement's martyr. Norkus' death was also von Schirach's chance. Von Schirach, a young man from the upper middle class, had heard Hitler speak in 1925 and was convinced of Nazi virtues. In October 1931, three months before Norkus' death, he outmanoeuvred Gruber, taking over as leader of the Hitler Youth. Von Schirach effectively linked Norkus' death to German heroic ideals and the role Hitler intended for the youth movement when he took power in Germany.

"What the Hitler Youth became in January 1932 was owed, not least, to the sacred symbol of the young spirit of sacrifice and heroism, which bears the name of Herbert Norkus," he stated.

Thereafter, he made a great deal out of making a pilgrimage to Norkus' grave every year and also paid tribute to the young man in songs and poems, which he wrote. For him Norkus' death was a holy martyrdom – a theme to which von Schirach repeatedly returned in his speeches for young people.

"The more who die for a movement, the more immortal it becomes. The Hitler Youth can face its critics with an historic answer: its own dead," he said in one of his speeches. Von Schirach's

## Metelmann loved Hitler

Henry Metelmann's father was a declared socialist and described the Nazis as "the brown plague". It did not prevent his son from entering wholeheartedly into the Hitler Youth and, later, the army. But Henry saw the truth at the front, and he spent the rest of his life coming to terms with his past. Before his death in 2011, Henry wrote two autobiographical books.



THE TELEGRAPH



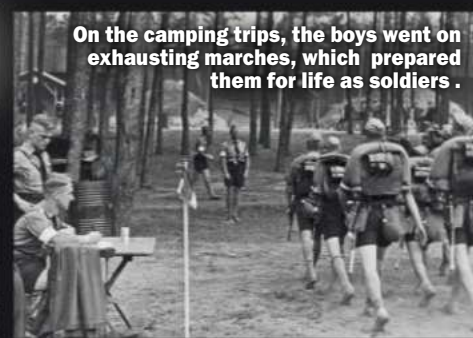
## Life in the field

The boys went on camping trips completely secluded from the outside world and without modern conveniences such as toilets. Here, the boys lived as if they were in the military. Every morning they were awakened by a reveille, and had to present freshly washed and polished boots within an hour. The entire day was scheduled and the camp was guarded at all times.



To confuse, Hitler Youth trips resembled games, but a seriousness lay behind them.

AOP/GETTY IMAGES



On the camping trips, the boys went on exhausting marches, which prepared them for life as soldiers.

GETTY IMAGES

sense of melodrama and propaganda matched that of Hitler and Goebbels', and he took advantage of his ability to obtain more members of the now rapidly growing Hitler Youth.

For example, the initiation ceremony, during which the young swore allegiance to the Führer and Germany on Hitler's birthday, was made into a national event: "Many thousands of citizens sent gifts to the Führer on his birthday," said von Schirach in a speech, "but the young men gave themselves."

### The Hitler Youth was adventure

It had not been quite so dramatic when Henry Metelmann became a member at

the age of 11 in 1933. Around that time, Henry started school, and was enrolled by his faithful mother into the Protestant youth organisation, Jungschar – a traditional scout movement. With Hitler's takeover in 1933, however, all youth organisations were either taken over by the Hitler Youth or prohibited.

This happened in a simple manner for Henry: while the children waited to be let into a Jungschar meeting in the local parish hall, they were collected by a corps of the Hitler Youth and marched around the city with drums.

His father's objection that the family could not afford the brown shirt, which was part of the uniform, was answered

with a pack of two solid brown uniform shirts – a gift from the party. Henry does not remember any great enthusiasm about the initiation, but he soon began to like Hitler Youth life: "The uniform was very smart with all the brown, the swastika and the shiny leather. And where, previously, we had rarely had a proper football, the Hitler Youth gave us proper equipment."

The boys were organised into local chapters, which met at least once a week and often on Sundays. The meetings took place in premises called Heim (home). A "home" could be an abandoned factory, an old barn or a cellar under a residential building. ►

## His brother's suicide turned von Schirach into a Nazi

**From childhood, the Hitler Youth leader was brought up to detest democracy and became one of Hitler's most faithful supporters.**

**B**aldur von Schirach's parents were highly critical of democracy, but it was the death of his brother, Karl, seven years his senior, that sent von Schirach into the arms of the Nazis. Karl, a veteran of World War I, committed suicide in grief over the fall of the Empire and the harsh conditions dictated by the Peace of Versailles.

"I don't want to see Germany's misfortune," he wrote in his farewell letter. Baldur had often heard his parents speak ill of the Republic, and his brother's suicide reinforced his emerging sense of hatred. He threw himself into the underground of the right-wing, militant

corps, and after hearing Hitler speak in 1925, he was an ardent Nazi.

As head of the Hitler Youth von Schirach made the organisation into a mighty martyr factory for the Führer. During the Nuremberg Trials, von Schirach was sentenced to 20 years in prison – not for his role in the Hitler Youth – but because as a Nazi leader in Vienna, he contributed to the deportation of the city's Jews. He was released from Spandau prison in 1966 and lived quietly in southern Germany until his death in 1974.



BALDUR VON SCHIRACH

After the war, the Hitler Youth leader was given a long prison sentence for his deeds.

SÜDDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG PHOTO



## Sport and athletics

Hitler Youth boys participated in sports including football, handball, boxing, wrestling and athletics. Great importance was also placed on the boys being able to swim. Those who could not, were either taught or simply thrown into the water. The children were made to run half-marathons and the winner was hailed as a champion. According to the Hitler Youth leaders, it taught the boys to strive for victory.



AOP/GETTY IMAGES

## Parades

Just like in the military, Hitler Youth boys went through tough drills. They learned how to walk in step and keep formation, which was aimed at instilling discipline in them. Hitler Youth members also participated in the Nazi Party's annual rally in Nuremberg, where up to 100,000 members marched and demonstrated what they had learned over the past year.

Henry engaged eagerly in work in his troop's "home", whitewashing walls, and decorating them with Nazi flags and posters, guns, steel helmets and quotes from Hitler's book, *Mein Kampf*.

At the meetings, they were taught the party line on issues such as racism, the Nazi party's history and the role of

women in society. They also sang from the Hitler Youth's own songbook. The ballads focused on Germany and the honour of falling in battle. Metelmann was most excited about the annual camping trips that lasted two to three weeks. The boys' parents paid only a symbolic sum to send the boys on these.

Henry, who had been brought up to believe that holidays were for the rich, greatly enjoyed these trips.

### Boys learned to fight

The camps were held in different parts of Germany. Henry, for example, visited an old castle in Thuringia, central Germany, and a camp on the Baltic coast near the Polish border.

The geographical distribution of the camps was no accident – the boys had to know their fatherland, which they one day had to be prepared to die for.

"It was largely through the Hitler Youth that I learned how varied and beautiful Germany is. The organisation gave me unconditional love for my fatherland and an almost spiritual readiness to defend it in all circumstances and by all means – even with my life," wrote Metelmann later.

At the camps the boys lived an outdoor life. They played ball, swam and slept in tents. But seriousness lay behind the play. When the boys were walking, one of the leaders could suddenly shout: "Attacking planes coming in low from the left", or "hostile machine gun-fire from the right" and the boys would have to take cover. Activities such as grenade throwing, foxhole digging and exercises in sneaking around undetected in the terrain also took place.

The boys also received training in the theory and history of war where leaders drew the front lines of famous battle in the sand, just like officers of the Wehrmacht would. The officers radiated strength and confidence, and the young men listened, fascinated, when soldiers reported on the modern weapons with which Hitler's regime had equipped the new Germany: submarines, armoured vehicles and fighter jets.

As time passed and Germany prepared for war, the Hitler Youth occupied more and more of the children's time at the expense of their schooling. When Henry Metelmann started school, he was training six days

## Girls were brought up to be healthy Aryan mothers

Children of practically every age had to be members of the Nazi state's youth organisations – even the girls.

**G**irls had to be a member of Jungmädelbund (10-14 years, Young Girls League), Bund Deutscher Mädel (14-18 years, the League of German Girls) or Glaube und Schönheit (18-21 years, the Faith and Beauty Society), where they did the following exercises and activities:

**Sports** e.g. gymnastics and marching. They also did exercises to train courage and group loyalty – such as jumping off diving boards and trust exercises.

**Indoctrination** e.g. in races and geography. The latter was to

demonstrate why the expansion of the Reich into the east was necessary. They also sang political songs that inspired patriotism, a fighting spirit and courage, and they learned to regard Hitler as the Father of Germany and the masculine ideal.

**Mothering** they practised changing nappies and other baby care on dolls. Moreover, chastity, until they found the right partner, was instilled in them. This principle was also underlined with edifying films, where founding a family was compared to dog breeding.



AOP/GETTY IMAGES





Hitler Youth march in honour of the Führer at the stadium in Potsdam.

SÜDDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG PHOTO



The boys trained for the huge parades for months.

GETTY IMAGES



Parades with thousands of boys were good for Nazi propaganda.

SÜDDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG PHOTO

a week. However, in 1937-38 the Nazi-controlled Ministry of Education introduced a Staatsjugendtag (State Youth Day), which meant that Saturdays were now for Hitler Youth activities.

Equipped with lunchboxes and canteens, Henry and his comrades were sent out for an entire day's combat training. The boys were divided into two teams: blue and red, each with a coloured ribbon tied around their arms. One group were to defend a certain position – e.g., a high point in a field – while the others were to try to take it. In reality it was about tearing the ribbons off the other group, who then “died” and had to leave the battlefield.

“In the beginning I hated that kind of battle, but with time I got used to it. You can – if you get enough time, you can get used to almost anything and then accept it as something natural,” wrote Metelmann.

### Schools goaded children

For those boys who were not members of the Hitler Youth, Saturday offered a repetition of Nazi party ideology and history – an alternative that certainly bored most boys so much that they willingly sought membership.

Participation in Hitler Youth was in principle voluntary until 1939, but the pressure to join was great. In early 1935 the Hitler Youth had

## Leaders called for bullying

In Hitler's words, Germany's youth had to be “as fast as a greyhound, as tough as leather and as hard as steel from Krupp”. Hitler Youth spared nothing in achieving this result.

The boys were pushed to the limit during training, so the leaders could see who had the physical strength to qualify for a place at the top of the hierarchical society. The boys' psyche was also classified: leaders went after the weak, marking them for additional ordeals. At the same time,

they called upon the boy's peers to do the same. Whoever was not strong enough would collapse and thus be thrown out – for the benefit of society, they said.

At one camp this principle was taken to its logical conclusion: a boy who could not swim, was thrown into deep water and drowned. The practice of throwing non-swimmers into deep water was, however, changed thereafter.

nearly four million members. Still, the ambitious von Schirach wanted more boys in the ranks. He declared 1936 the boys' year in his New Year's speech. For the first time, all boys born in a particular year were now automatically enrolled in the Hitler Youth. Under the slogan “All Youth for the Führer”, von Schirach launched a huge propaganda campaign.

Through radio and newspapers, in schools and at sporting events, young boys were invited to sign up to the swastika. Von Schirach gained access to local directories and sent letters to all German parents

of boys born in 1926. At the same time, schools were reminded that they should persuade hesitant students to engage in the organisation.

Those who refused got a rough ride. Henry remembers how a classmate, who was not a member of Hitler Youth, was interrogated by the school's Nazi regime informant – biology teacher Karl Sieg – in front of all of the students. At least once a year, Sieg came into the class and asked everyone, who was not a member of the Hitler Youth, to raise their hands. The talented and likable Walter Römer raised his hand every time. Walter remained as silent as the grave, while Sieg, with increasing fury, questioned him about this choice. Only when Sieg started asking about ▶

### ADOLF HITLER

In April 1945 Hitler presented several members of Hitler Youth with medals for bravery.

POLFOTO/ULLSTEIN





## War training

The boys were, for instance, divided into teams that had to fight each other for a territory. Training including real, physical fighting. The boys also learned how to dig foxholes and use camouflage techniques. Hand-grenade throwing was another of their activities, and they learned the history and theory of war through lectures or visits from World War I veterans.



An 11 year-old boy learns how to fire a rifle under the watch of an adult.

AOP/GETTY IMAGES



The boys also familiarised themselves with machine guns.

GETTY IMAGES

Walter's parents did the class teacher get involved. Although it remained unsaid, everyone knew that even a hint of an anti-Nazi position could mean the death of Walter's parents.

When news of the war's outbreak came in 1939, many Hitler Youth members were excited. They looked forward to the final showdown with

"sub-humans" in the east and to playing their role as the master race. The boys began as a reserve force, handling tasks like firefighting and mail delivery. But as the war progressed, the boys were sent directly into the battlefield.

**Henry experiences the war's horrors**  
Metelmann received the news of the

war's outbreak with joy and, at age 18, enlisted in the army. Later, he was sent to the Eastern Front as a tank driver: "I was so excited," he remembers. "Now I could show the Führer what I was made of." However, Henry realised that the war was not just about victory and heroism on the Eastern Front. As his division approached Stalingrad, he

## 12 year-old boys were to stop The Red Army

In the war's last days the Nazis were so desperate that they gave Hitler Youth the task of defending Berlin.

Several thousands of boys lost their lives in the fight against the well-equipped and battle trained Soviet Army.

**A**t the end of April 1945 the Soviets closed their iron ring around Berlin. The city's houses were shot to pieces. German soldiers killed by their own for desertion hung from lampposts.

In the Führerbunker, Hitler and those closest to him listened tensely to the sound of the thundering Russian guns, knowing that defeat was inevitable. Only the brainwashed Hitler Youth still believed that the war could be won – and the Nazis took advantage of it.

The young, some of whom were children of just 12 years, were sent on suicide missions, armed only with Panzerfaust – a simple grenade launcher – to attack Russian tanks. Others had to guard key bridges like

those over the river Havel at Pichelsdorf. The Hitler Youth was to keep bridges open, because they could be used as escape routes.

Their courage was in vain, for the Russian tanks drove right over them. Survivors remember how the dead and wounded lay everywhere. A few days later, April 30, Hitler was dead, and all talk of winning the war ceased.

"For whom and for what did we defend the bridges?" asked the former Hitler Youth member Reinhard Appel later. "So that someone like the Jew murderer Himmler could escape? It makes you sick." Only a few hundred of the 5,000 Hitler Youth members ordered to defend Berlin survived.

Children as young as 12 fought in Berlin's ruins.

SCALA

**Despair and exhaustion shone from the face of the 16 year-old Hitler Youth member, Hans-Georg Henke, when he was captured in 1945. He had been orphaned during the war and signed up to the air force to support himself.**

POLFO/ULLSTEIN



## Hitler Youth became a movement of millions

- 1940** **8,000,000 members:** Record numbers due to the Hitler Youth making it obligatory for all "Aryan" boys, the year before.
- 1936** **4,000,000 members:** The movement's leader, Baldur von Schirach, sends out letters to families with boys of the relevant age.
- 1932** **100,000 members:** This figure is from the end of the year – a few weeks before Hitler takes power.
- 1930** **25,000 members:** The New York Exchange crashes a year earlier. Germans flock to the Nazi Party.
- 1925** **5,000 members:** The Nazi Party prepares for the power struggle.

talked with the residents of some houses, which the soldiers had seized and he fell in love with a Russian girl. When he fell ill, at one point, a Russian woman looked after him. These experiences led him to doubt what the Hitler Youth leaders had taught him about the Russians' racial inferiority.

After the 1943 defeat at Stalingrad, Henry saw brutality that the Hitler Youth had not prepared him for. The Red Army had left a wounded comrade on the road, but instead of helping him, a German officer ordered his troops to drive over the wounded man.

And, later, those troops shot some teenage girls who were desperately searching for a place to hide.

### Brainwashing left its mark

As Henry fought his way back from Stalingrad, disillusioned and confused, he wished he could speak with his father, who had repeatedly warned him about Hitler and his ideas. But his father had died before Henry was sent to the front, so only he heard his confession that he had made a terrible mistake.

Henry was not the only Hitler Youth member to have his idea of war as an

extension of youthful summer camps with bonfire songs and good-natured tumult shredded. The young fought on all fronts of the war and were even given their own SS division – the 12th SS Panzer Division Hitler Youth – which was deployed against the advancing Allied forces in France after D-Day and nearly wiped out.

For those who survived the war, facing the full truth of Hitler's regime was overwhelming. Henry, whose last war effort was defending a small town on the Rhine, was captured in 1945 by the Americans. On the way to a POW camp he saw pictures from liberated concentration camps in an American magazine. Despite his new insight into his deception by the Hitler Youth, his upbringing by the demagogic youth organisation had left its mark: "Just because we've lost the war, they accuse us of anything," he said indignantly to his companions.

However, Henry slowly began to realise the truth. He spent the following years as a prisoner in the US and England. When he returned to Germany in 1948, he felt alienated. He felt that his countrymen had not acknowledged the deception to which they had been exposed. After just four months he packed his bags and returned to England, where he found work first on a farm and later as a gardener.

He also tried to make peace with his past – such as through his memoirs about his time in Hitler Youth. "The feeling of guilt about what I have done to others – especially the Russians – weighs heavy on my shoulders. I regret the suffering I have caused others, and don't complain about what others have done to me," he wrote before his death in 2011. ■

### READ MORE

- Henry Metelmann: **A Hitler Youth. Growing up in Germany in the 1930s**, Caliban Books, 1997
- Michael Kater: **Hitler Youth**, Harvard University Press, 2004

## Famous Germans in Hitler Youth

Years after the war, a number of famous Germans were "revealed" to have been members of Hitler Youth. However, it has not resulted in too much scandal as it was almost impossible to avoid membership at that time in Germany. But, for some, a past in the Nazi youth movement was often a shadow over their life and career.

### Prince Claus of Holland (1926-2002)

was enrolled in Hitler Youth at the age of 14. His past German life made life difficult for the Dutch prince consort Claus von Amsberg, and only in his last years did the people really accept him.



### Hans-Dietrich Genscher (1927-

2016): the later Foreign Minister was automatically enrolled in Hitler Youth at the age of 14. Genscher was originally from Halle in East Germany, but moved to West Germany in 1952.



### Günter Grass (1927-2015): one of

Germany's best known authors. In 2006 he revealed he had been a member of Hitler Youth and the SS. He was automatically enrolled in Hitler Youth and forced into the SS in 1944-45.



### Joseph Ratzinger (prev. Pope

Benedikt, born 1927) wrote in his 1996 autobiography that he had been a member of Hitler Youth. However, according to his brother, the later pope played truant on the meetings.





# TERROR CAMPA

**“THE SS WAS NAZI  
GERMANY’S MOST  
IMPORTANT TERROR  
ORGANISATION”**

Heinrich Himmler was the  
head of the SS from 1929  
to 1945.

CORBIS/GETTY



# IGN IN EUROPE

In 1929, Heinrich Himmler was appointed as the new head of the Nazi party's security organisation, the SS. Under his leadership, the group grew into a feared elite force, which ruthlessly suppressed its enemies to realise Hitler's dream of a new Aryan Germany.

Text: NIKLAS SENNERTEG



SS soldiers parade during a party rally in Nuremberg in 1933.



The smartly dressed man with the death head badge on his uniform cap had never seen a corpse with his own eyes before. That's why he bent over the edge of the mass grave to take a closer look.

At that moment, a group of SS men who were standing by the hole let loose a volley of gunfire to finish off the Jews who were still alive in the pit. Brain matter from one of the victims splattered on to the spectator's uniform.

The man swayed and began to shake as if he were about to vomit. An adjutant quickly steadied him and led him away from the terrible scene.

It was 15th August, 1941, less than two months after the German invasion of the Soviet Union had begun. The nauseated man was none other than SS leader Reichsführer Heinrich Luitpold Himmler, who'd been instructing his underlings to use ruthless force against the enemies of the Third Reich for many years.

During a visit to the city of Minsk, which had recently been captured by the Germans, Himmler had asked to watch a mass killing. Gruppenführer Arthur Nebe, chief of Einsatzgruppe B (Belarus) – one of the paramilitary death squads sent to the Soviet Union to follow the advancing German troops – arranged an execution of 98 men and two women for his special guest. Just before the execution began, Himmler went to one of the victims, a tall young man that



**SS cracked down on all opposition to the Nazi party.**



**Hitler's driver Julius Schreck.**

Himmler considered too blond to be a Jew.

"Are you a Jew?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Are both your parents Jews?"

"Yes."

"Do you have any other ancestors who were not Jews?"

"No."

"Then I can't help you," he said coolly, terminating the conversation.

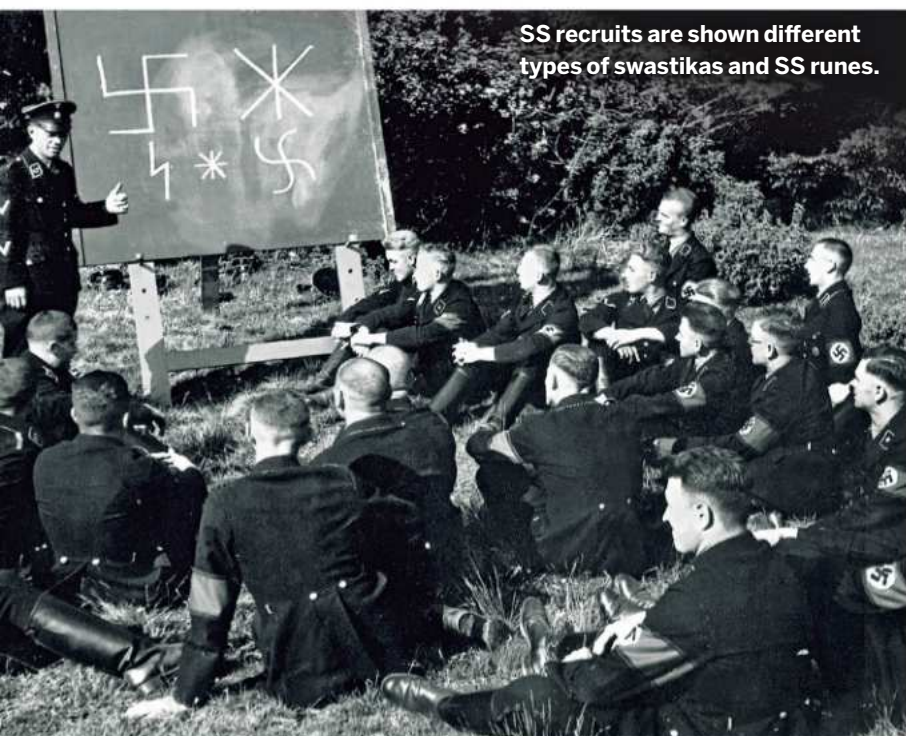
The sickening scene Himmler had just witnessed was not enough for his resolve to falter even a single inch. No matter how awful it was, they had to carry out their orders. He could not let them fail to do it. In the name of the *Tausendjähriges Reich* (Thousand-Year Reich) they had to be hard and determined, Himmler stressed.

**THE SS WAS NAZI GERMANY'S** most important terror organisation. It oversaw the mass murder of six million Jews along with the persecution and execution of millions of others who did not conform to Nazi political, religious or racist ideals. The organisation was responsible for a wide range of activities, including espionage, the colonisation of conquered territories and conducting medical experiments on prisoners. The SS also operated businesses, industries and orphanages, developed new farming methods, and researched the origins of the German and Aryan peoples. In addition, it had a military wing, the Waffen-SS, which served the party's needs at home in Germany and fought on the front line during World War II. The SS worked outside the law and independently of other authorities; in practice it was a state within the state.

SS – an abbreviation of *Schutzstaffel*, German for "protection squad" – had its roots in Hitler's personal bodyguard. In the early 1920s, Adolf Hitler had 21 bodyguards who were tasked with protecting him during the brawls that frequently broke out at Nazi party gatherings. After a failed Nazi coup in Munich during 1923, Hitler ended up in prison and the Nazi party was banned. When Hitler was released from Landsberg Prison in the mid 1920s and resumed running the Nazi party, he instructed his driver, former actor Julius Schreck, to organise a new bodyguard. This group formed the basis of the SS.

Four years later, Hitler appointed an energetic party official named Heinrich Himmler as the new chairman of the SS. Working tirelessly, Himmler boosted its numbers from 280 members to 52,000 by the end of 1932. A year later, the SS had more than 200,000 men at its disposal.

To help him, Himmler had Reinhard Tristan Eugen Heydrich, a naval officer and notorious womaniser



**SS recruits are shown different types of swastikas and SS runes.**

SZ-Photo/IBL



This SA brigade marches through Berlin in 1932.



## “IN THE NAME OF THE THOUSAND-YEAR REICH THEY HAD TO BE... DETERMINED”

who had been fired for “conduct unbecoming to an officer and a gentleman” for a scandal involving a lady. In 1931, Himmler tasked him with organising the Nazi party’s own intelligence service, which soon became known as *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD). Over the years that followed, Heydrich became the architect of the Nazis’ terror apparatus.

**DESPITE ITS RAPIDLY GROWING** membership, the SS was only a small force compared to Hitler’s ‘party army’, the *Sturmabteilung* (SA), during its early years. This organisation was led by the former army captain, Ernst Julius Günther Röhm. While the SA’s brown-clad, unruly brawlers broke up the meetings of other parties, caused pandemonium on the streets and mistreated political opponents, the SS was a more disciplined organisation and served as the party’s own police force. Himmler wanted the SS to become an elite force, the nobility of the new Nazi empire. He expected the members to ▶



HILTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES





After Hitler's power grab in 1933, the SA rounded up opponents of Nazism.

- embody the Nazi super-human ideal. The admission requirements were, therefore, very strict. The applicant had to be a healthy and strong male aged 25-35, over 170cm tall and possessing an Aryan appearance. In addition, every applicant had to provide two witnesses who were willing to vouch for his honesty and good character.

SS men were schooled to believe in the Nazis' racist ideology and to obey all orders blindly. The ideal SS man, according to Himmler, was a gentleman with a clean record who, on command, was boundlessly brutal against the Nazi's enemies and who would not hesitate to sacrifice his own life.

Himmler set up detailed provisions to regulate the conduct of his men. For instance, SS men who

wanted to marry had to have their choice of bride approved by Himmler personally. The woman's family tree was examined to confirm whether she was of 'good race'. Finally, the SS leader would look at a photo of the man's intended and if he didn't like what he saw, there was no wedding.

**HIMMLER SHROUDED THE SS** in secrecy and sanctioned mysterious rites to enhance the organisation's image as an exclusive order. In the 1930s, SS men adopted their iconic black uniforms with the death head (*totenkopf*) emblem on the cap and the SS runes (*siegrune*) on the collar. The SS motto "*Meine Ehre heißt Treue*" – my honour is loyalty – emphasised which qualities were valued highest, and Hitler called Himmler "The faithful Heinrich" because of his unswerving loyalty.

When the Nazis took power in 1933, it triggered a wave of terror and persecution against the party's political opponents. Many were thrown into the SA's improvised camps. Himmler failed to land any of the newly vacant government posts. Instead, he was made a chief of police in Bavaria. There he

**“HIMMLER SHROUDED THE SS IN SECRECY AND SANCTIONED MYSTERIOUS RITES TO ENHANCE THE ORGANISATION'S IMAGE AS AN EXCLUSIVE ORDER”**



established a political police force under Heydrich's leadership. Its goal was to pursue the party's opponents. In parallel, Göring created his own secret police – the Gestapo – in Germany's largest state, Prussia. The Gestapo was later integrated into the SS's extensive security network.

In the same year in Bavaria, Dachau opened. It was the SS's first concentration camp. Officially, Dachau existed to politically re-educate the party's 'wrong-headed' opponents so that they could be integrated into the new Nazi society. In reality, everyday life in the camp was about terror, abuse and death. Dachau was used as a model for subsequent German concentration camps.

The Nazi power takeover also heralded an internal power struggle within the party. SA chief Röhm was dissatisfied with the role given to his brown shirts. He believed that they deserved a more prominent role in the emerging Nazi state. To the consternation of the conservative generals in the Wehrmacht, Röhm insisted on becoming Minister of War and transforming the SA into a People's Army. But Röhm wasn't simply opposed by senior officers in the Wehrmacht: behind the scenes, Hitler was being fed false information by Himmler, Heydrich and Göring who claimed that Röhm was planning a coup d'état.

**ON 30TH JUNE, 1934,** Himmler and Göring led SS groups and police forces in an action to eliminate the SA's leadership and other inconvenient political opponents. The total number of victims of the so-called Night of the Long Knives is unknown, but it's likely that hundreds were arrested, including Röhm.

As a reward for this action, the SS finally gained the status of an independent organisation, which opened the door for Himmler's ambitions. In the years that followed, he cemented his position as the head of Hitler's security forces. In 1934, he became responsible for the Gestapo, and two years later became chief of police throughout Germany. At the same time, he appointed Heydrich to lead the Gestapo and the Kripo, the criminal police force. The pair could now throw anyone into a concentration camp for an indefinite period without trial. Himmler and Heydrich continued to build up the security network, determined to break any and all internal resistance. During World War II, the SS's sphere of influence grew as Hitler handed it responsibility for implementing key Nazi goals, such as enacting the party's Lebensraum policy in Eastern Europe. Hitler and Himmler dreamed of creating a giant German empire by using Aryan Germans to colonise a vast swathe of Eastern Europe stretching from the German border to the Ural mountains.

The Slavic people who lived there would be eliminated or driven from their lands. As part of the ►

# Heinrich Himmler (1900–45)

## UPBRINGING

Raised in a conservative, middle-class family in Munich. Joined the army in 1918, but was unable to get to the front before World War I was over. Studied agronomy after the war.

## CAREER

Became a member of the Nazi Party in 1923. He worked as one of the party's foremost propagandists before being appointed as leader of the SS with the rank of Reichsführer-SS in 1929. In 1933, Himmler became a police chief in Bavaria, in 1934, the chief of Gestapo, in 1936, the chief of the German police force and in 1939, Commissioner for the Strengthening of German Nationhood. In 1943, Himmler became Minister of the Interior, in 1944 he was appointed head of the German reserve forces, Plenipotentiary General for Administration and commander of an army group on the Western Front. Finally, in 1945, Himmler became the commander of an army group on the Eastern Front, and responsible for organizing a Nazi militia unit (Werewolf), but it only existed on paper. That same year, Himmler committed suicide in British captivity.

## FAMILY

Married Margarethe Siegroth in 1929 and had a daughter the same year. He also adopted a son. He also had another two children through an extramarital affair with secretary Hedwig Potthast.



Himmler at the peak of his career (1), as a 7-year-old (2), as a brigadier (3) and with his wife and child (4).





The SS and Gestapo secret police built a comprehensive system of controls to eradicate all opposition to the Nazi party.



The Nazi party launched a boycott of Jewish shops in 1933.

- invasion of the Soviet Union, Himmler and other Nazi leaders predicted that 20 to 30 million Soviet citizens would starve to death, partly because the Nazis intended to block food supplies. A select number of the 'subordinated' Slavic people would be allowed to remain as a cheap labour force.

**THE WORST CRIME** associated with the SS was the persecution and attempted genocide of the Jewish people, or what the Nazis liked to euphemistically term "The Final Solution".

Jewish persecution began as soon as the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933. Using threats, acts of terror and new laws, the Jews were quickly deprived of their positions, property and citizenship.

In January 1939, Heydrich was commissioned to 'solve' the Jewish question by means of forced migration, but this plan was thwarted as most countries closed their borders to Jewish refugees. Himmler sent in four paramilitary death squads, the *Einsatzgruppen*, during the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. The 3,000 men in the squads were charged with the assassination of Jews, Romas, communists and others deemed undesirable by the Nazis. During the first year of the campaign, an estimated one million people were killed in the mass murders, including those witnessed by Himmler in Minsk in August 1941.

In the autumn of that year, Hitler commissioned Himmler to proceed with the extermination of all Jews throughout Europe.

**The SS conducted research projects to prove that the Aryan breed was superior to the rest of humanity. Here a woman's head is being measured during one such test.**



In 1942, the trains began to feed death camps that had been especially fitted with gas chambers. The camps were hidden in relatively remote locations in occupied Poland. One, Auschwitz-Birkenau soon became the leading death factory, where Jews were killed en masse with the cyanide-based poison Zyklon B. The camp was so efficient that the Nazis centralised their efforts and held all gas executions there. Other camps in Eastern Europe – Treblinka, Chelmno and Sobibor – were closed one by one.

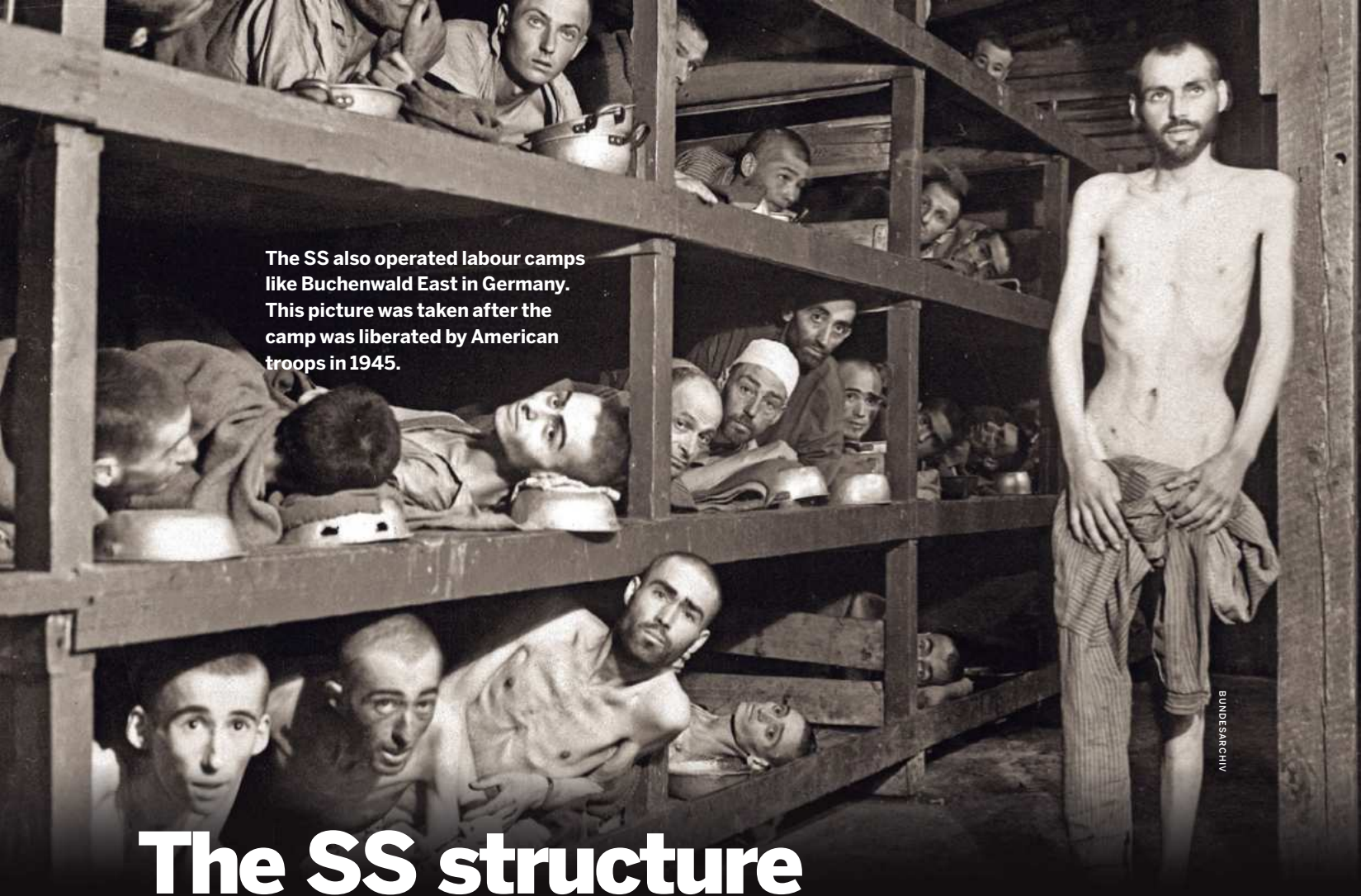
Even though the programme of annihilation was kept secret and camouflaged as 'evacuation' and 'relocation', information and rumours about what was happening – both in Germany and in the outside world – soon spread. With a desire to keep accurate records, SS bureaucrats documented the cold-blooded killings and many of these documents were discovered after the war.

By this time, German society had been mobilised for war. Many workers were summoned to serve at the front, which led to a lack of labour in the armament factories. Himmler decided that those prisoners who could work, should work and began renting out prison workforces to industrialists, like Krupp and IG Farben.

Small-scale concentration camps were established alongside the factories.

For many of these sick and emaciated prisoners, working in such a camp simply meant a more protracted death than if ►





The SS also operated labour camps like Buchenwald East in Germany. This picture was taken after the camp was liberated by American troops in 1945.

# The SS structure

The SS was a complicated bureaucratic organisation. It was divided into three main branches:

## ALLGEMEINE-SS

Around one third of Allgemeine-SS personnel worked full time in an SS office, drew a salary and had a rank. Most people who served in the SS's other organisations or state-controlled authorities also held a rank within the Allgemeine-SS.

## WAFFEN-SS

The Waffen-SS became an independent military force with its own high command in 1940. It brought together a conglomerate of SS armed paramilitary and police forces.

## SS-TODENKOPFVERBANDE

This force, made up of the so-called Death Head units,



consisted of concentration camp guards. From 1938, personnel were rotated between camp duty and service in the

field. Able-bodied guards were stationed on the front line, while those who were no longer fit for duty were used at the camps.







**Jews from the liquidated Warsaw ghetto were rounded up and taken to concentration camps following their uprising in 1943.**

▶ they had been delivered to a gas chamber. According to the affidavit of Dr Wilhelm Jaeger, the senior doctor for the Krupp slaves, “The Tartars and Kyrgyz suffered most; they collapsed like flies [from] bad housing, the poor quality and insufficient quantity of food, overwork and insufficient rest... At times the water supply at the camps was shut off for periods of from eight to 14 days.”

The camps also became a resource for doctors who wanted to carry out medical experiments — often with fatal results. Most notorious were the terrible experiments performed on children by Joseph Mengele, camp doctor at Auschwitz.

**HIMMLER’S POWER CONTINUED** to grow during the war. In 1943 he was appointed Minister of the Interior, and in 1944 he became responsible for all prisoners of war and for the training of men and officers destined for the Wehrmacht.

Military setbacks started to pile up, however, and the Third Reich was close to falling. Towards the end of the war Himmler organised the *Volkssturm*, a militia force consisting of young boys and old men. It proved to be worthless because it lacked training, modern weapons and suitable commanders.

During the final months of the war, Hitler handed over command of Germany’s vast armed forces to Himmler. Not surprisingly, the SS boss, who lacked military experience, proved inept as a commander.

Himmler withdrew to a sanatorium with his mistress in the final weeks of the war. Behind

Hitler’s back, he tried to broker a peace with the British and American governments using the Swedish diplomat Count Folke Bernadotte as a go-between. When this was revealed, Hitler dismissed “the faithful Heinrich” and branded him a traitor.

The next day, Hitler committed suicide and the war was all but over. Hunted by the Allies, Himmler went on the run in the hope of escaping justice, but he was caught at a checkpoint a few weeks later. Having admitted his real identity and knowing that only death and disgrace awaited him, Himmler bit down on a cyanide capsule that was hidden in his mouth and was dead 15 minutes later.

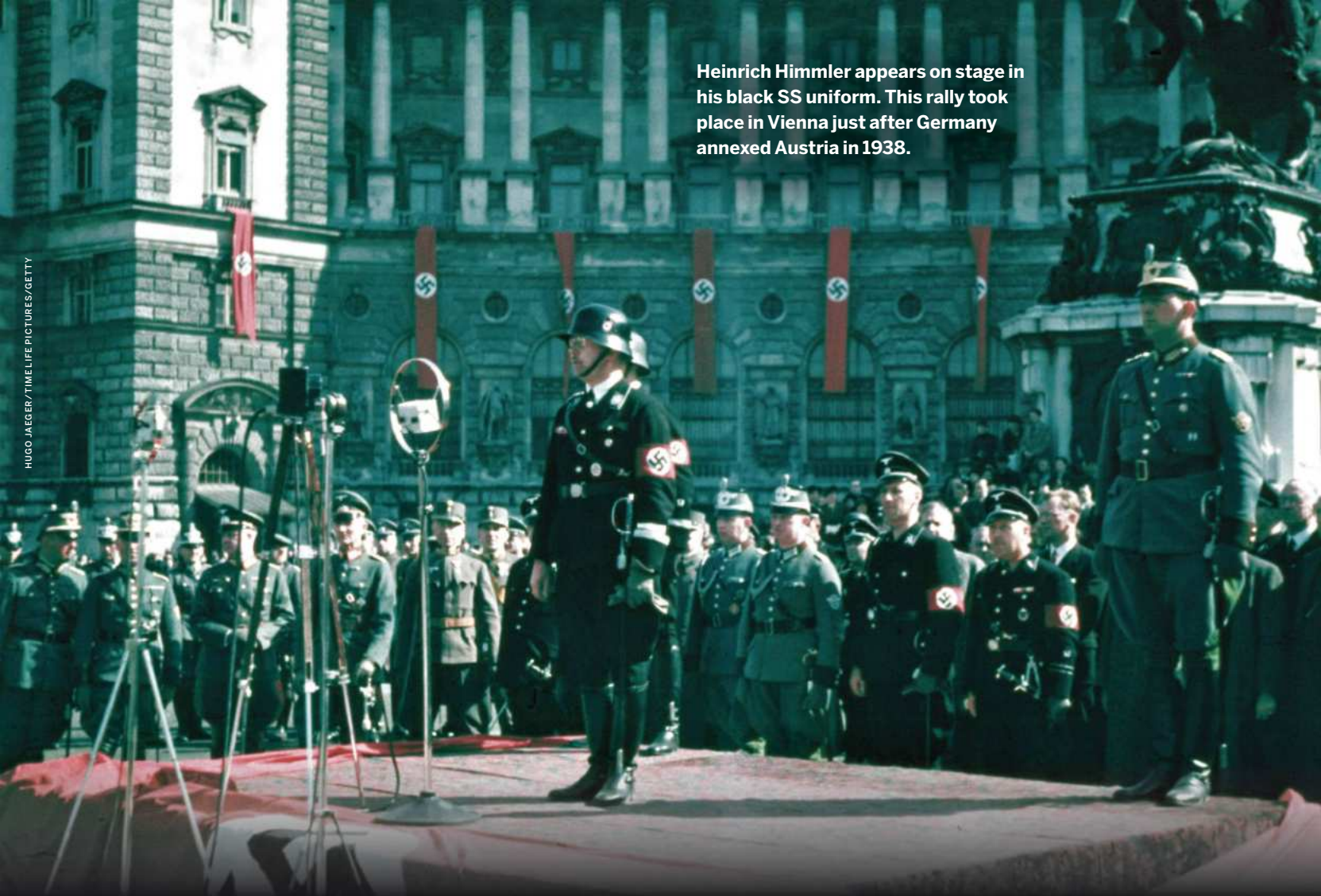
**DURING THE NUREMBERG WAR TRIALS** of 1945 and 1946, the entire SS was declared to be a criminal organisation, automatically making all its members criminals, but while many SS leaders were convicted of both war crimes and other violations by the Allied and West German courts after the war, most former SS men went on to live normal lives in West Germany, Austria or elsewhere, without ever being prosecuted. For example, of the 7,000 SS men who served at Auschwitz, fewer than 800 were ever investigated or charged by the authorities. ■

**Niklas Sennerteg** is a military historian.

**Further reading:** *Hitler’s Henchmen* (2005) by Guido Knopp ★ *Heinrich Himmler* (2012) by Peter Longerich ★ *The SS: A New History* (2010) by Adrian Weale



Heinrich Himmler appears on stage in his black SS uniform. This rally took place in Vienna just after Germany annexed Austria in 1938.



# Himmler's top-secret speech

★ Excerpt from a secret speech that Himmler gave to SS generals in the city of Posen in Poland on 4th October, 1943:

"I also want to talk to you, quite frankly, on a very grave matter. Among ourselves it should be

mentioned quite frankly, and yet we will never speak of it publicly.

"I mean the clearing out of the Jews, the extermination of the Jewish race. It's one of those things it is easy to talk about – 'The Jewish race is being exterminated', says one party member, 'that's quite clear, it's in our programme – elimination of the Jews, and we're doing it,

**"THE JEWISH RACE IS BEING EXTERMINATED"**

exterminating them.' And then they come, 80 million worthy Germans, and each one has his decent Jew. Of course the others are vermin, but this one is an A-1

Jew. Not one of all those who talk this way has witnessed it, not one of them has been through it. Most

of you must know what it means when 100 corpses are lying side by side, or 500 or 1,000. To have stuck it out and at the same time – apart from exceptions caused by human weakness – to have remained decent fellows, that is what has made us hard. This is a page of glory in our history which has never been written and is never to be."



Extermination camps were scattered throughout Poland and Belarus run by Totenkopf-SS forces.



*Third Reich babies were  
cared for superbly – so long  
as the parents had the right  
Aryan genes.*







# NAZIS KIDNAP ARYAN CHILDREN

People with the right genes are in high demand in Hitler's Germany and the Nazis will do everything possible to provide the Third Reich with blonde-haired and blue-eyed citizens. The party even kidnaps children from occupied countries and endorses non-marital sex.



## THE STAGE IS SET



The Nazis' long-term plan is for the Germanic people to colonise Eastern Europe once the area has been cleared of its native residents. But Germany lacks people for the project. To solve the problem, SS boss Heinrich Himmler launches one of the Nazis' most bizarre projects: the Lebensborn programme.



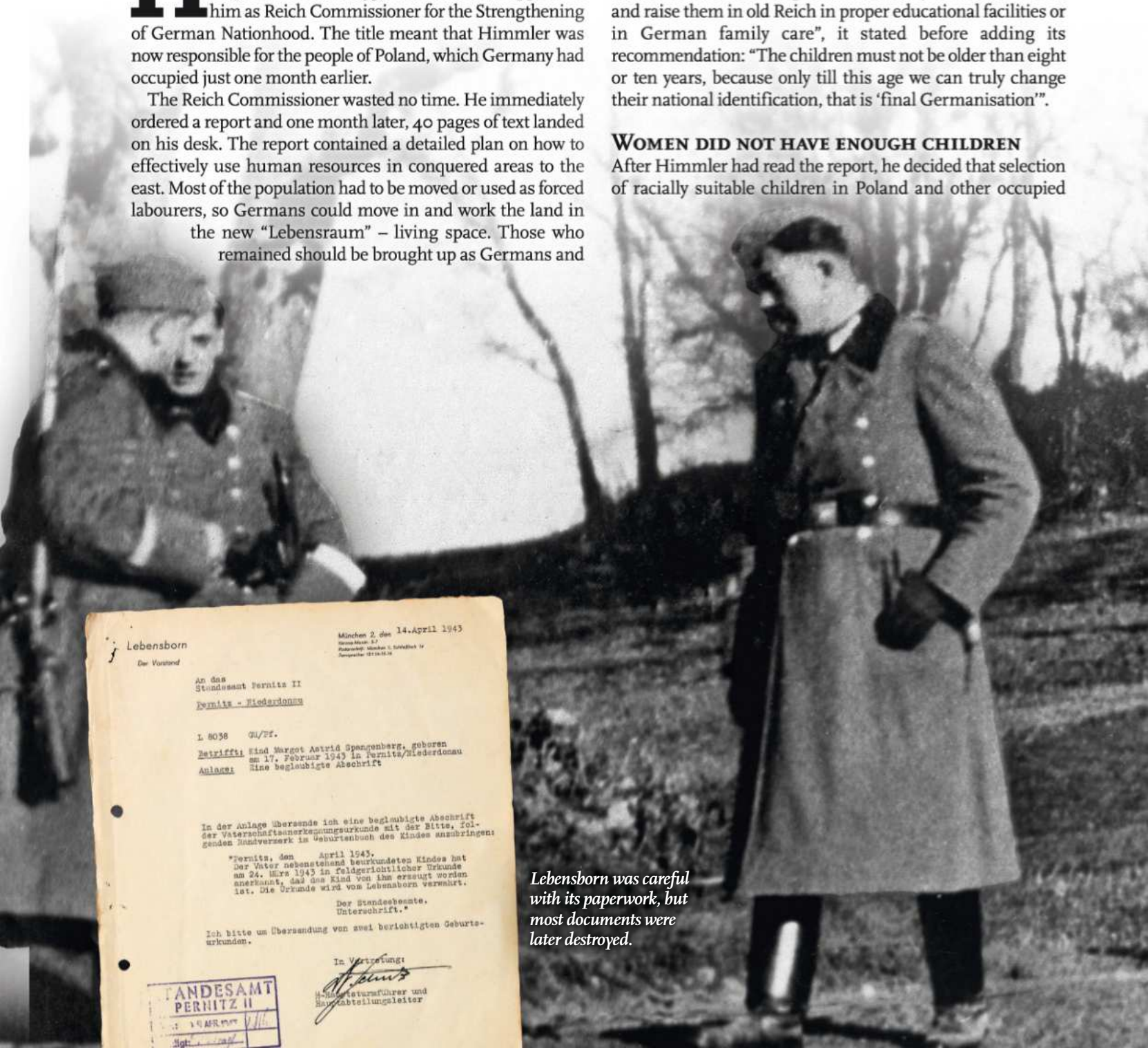
**H**EINRICH HIMMLER WAS HAPPY. 7th October, 1939 was a very special day for the SS-Reichsführer: Not only had he turned 39, but Hitler also appointed him as Reich Commissioner for the Strengthening of German Nationhood. The title meant that Himmler was now responsible for the people of Poland, which Germany had occupied just one month earlier.

The Reich Commissioner wasted no time. He immediately ordered a report and one month later, 40 pages of text landed on his desk. The report contained a detailed plan on how to effectively use human resources in conquered areas to the east. Most of the population had to be moved or used as forced labourers, so Germans could move in and work the land in the new "Lebensraum" – living space. Those who remained should be brought up as Germans and

become a part of the master race. The report recommended that selection occurred mainly among the youngest: "We should exclude from deportations racially valuable children and raise them in old Reich in proper educational facilities or in German family care", it stated before adding its recommendation: "The children must not be older than eight or ten years, because only till this age we can truly change their national identification, that is 'final Germanisation'".

#### WOMEN DID NOT HAVE ENOUGH CHILDREN

After Himmler had read the report, he decided that selection of racially suitable children in Poland and other occupied



Lebensborn  
Der Vorstand

München 2, den 14. April 1943  
Herrn Reichsführer SS  
Postfach 1, München 1, Stadthaus 14  
Telefon: 2711-11-12

An das  
Standesamt Pernitz II  
Pernitz - Niederdonau

L. 8058 Gd/Pf.

Betrifft: Kind Margot Astrid Spangenberg, geboren  
am 17. Februar 1943 in Pernitz/Niederdonau  
Anlage: Eine beglaubigte Abschrift

In der Anlage übersende ich eine beglaubigte Abschrift  
der Vaterschaftsenerkennungsurkunde mit der Bitte, fol-  
genden Randvermerk im Geburtsbuch des Kindes anzubringen:

\*Pernitz, den 14. April 1943.  
Der Vater nebenstehend beurkundeten Kindes hat  
am 24. März 1943 in feldgerichtlicher Urkunde  
anerkannt, das das Kind von ihm erzeugt worden  
ist. Die Urkunde wird vom Lebensborn verwahrt.

Der Standesbeamte.  
Unterschrift: \*

Ich bitte um Übersendung von zwei berichtigten Geburts-  
urkunden.

In Vertretung:  
*H. Himmler*  
H.-Reichsführer und  
Hauptabteilungsleiter

STANDESAMT  
PERNITZ II  
14 APR 1943  
Hgt. *[Signature]*

*Lebensborn was careful  
with its paperwork, but  
most documents were  
later destroyed.*



countries had to start as soon as possible – even if it meant that hundreds of thousands of children would be torn from their families, have a blurred identity and be placed with adoptive parents in a foreign country. The acquisition of new model citizens for the Third Reich took priority.

The organisation responsible for the project had already been established four years earlier. Lebensborn – Fount of life – was launched in December 1935. Lebensborn was launched as a welfare organisation, whose main purpose was to run the wards and maternity homes for unmarried women and their babies. The reason was not charity. Germany was facing a population crisis, as the country's population had been declining for decades. In 1900, the birth rate had been 35.8 children per thousand inhabitants; by 1933, when Hitler came to power, the figure had dropped to 14.7. If the Führer's ambition to populate the lands east of Germany with Aryans was to succeed, the trend would need reversing. In total Himmler estimated that 120 million people were needed.

On posters and in propaganda writings family life and motherhood were praised. Child support and special loans for married couples with the possibility of recompense for each new birth lured Germans to bring more children into the world. At the same time, clinics that counselled about contraception were closed and advertising contraceptives was banned. Abortion was outlawed and labelled as "sabotage against Germany's racial future".

The idea of increasing the population with large numbers of so-called racially superior children was an ingrained part of the party's thinking. "If Germany every year would have a



NAME

MAX SOLLMANN

TITLE

LEBENSBOHN LEADER

**Merchant became programme director**

Max Sollmann was a thriving merchant who travelled to Columbia in the 1920s and built up a chain of trading houses. In 1934 he decided to return home. He'd been an avid Nazi as a young man and now decided to make a career of it. In 1940 he became head of the Lebensborn programme. After the war, Sollmann was convicted of crimes in the SS, but not for Lebensborn activities.



- Attended Beer Hall Putsch in 1923.
- Retired to Bavaria.

million children and eliminate 700,000- 800,000 of the weakest, the end result would probably be an increase in strength", Hitler stated at a party meeting in 1929. "Should we succeed in establishing this Nordic race from and around Germany... and from this seedbed produce a race of 200 million, the world will belong to us", added Himmler grandly.

#### WOMEN WERE CHECKED THOROUGHLY

Lebensborn was an important tool in the plans for the Nazis' future, and the first home for unmarried



*Kidnapped children from Yugoslavia were taken away for possible adoption in Germany.*





Head shape was important in determining if Polish children could be accepted as Aryans.

pregnant women opened just a few months after the organisation was founded. Heim Hochland lay in Steinhöring, an area 30 kilometres east of Munich and had formerly housed a Catholic orphanage, but the Nazis threw the original residents out and furnished their own home for mothers and children.

The institution could initially house up to 30 mothers and 55 children,

and applicants were carefully examined. Only women considered fertile by the Nazis were considered. In this way, the Board ensured that the Reich's new children had the right qualities to match the requirements of the master race.

In keeping with the beliefs about human beings and their physical characteristics, a woman's skull was measured and her head shape was examined. Only women with the sought-after elongated skull, which the Nazis believed was typical of Aryans, had a chance to be admitted. Characteristics like blonde hair and blue or green eyes were also prerequisites, while women should be disease-free and healthy too.

Those who passed the test would receive, in return, the finest care in exquisite surroundings. Homes were set up in stately houses that like Heim Hochland were often stolen. Some had belonged to Hitler's personal enemies, while others had previously been inhabited by Jews now exiled by the regime. The headquarters in Munich was also a seized house that had belonged to the anti-Nazi writer Thomas Mann.

Some homes were already decorated with abandoned furniture from residents who had been sent to concentration camps. All institutions were equipped with modern medical equipment and staffed by trained personnel.

The luxury conditions had an effect. In 1939, Gregor Ebner, Lebensborn's medical director, informed Himmler that a total

of 1,300 mothers had applied for a place in one of the homes. 653 had met the race and health requirements. Births had gone extremely well: while the death rate for newborns in Germany stood at six percent, the figure for Lebensborn homes was half that. "The births are very easy, without many complications. This is attributable to the racial selection and the quality of the women we get", Ebner wrote proudly.

The costs were correspondingly high – 400 Reichsmark per mother. "That isn't much of a sacrifice if you can save a thousand children of good blood", Ebner commented.

Some children fell foul of the Nazis, however, even though the mothers had been through the acceptance process – and a cruel fate might await the infants. Ingrid von Oelhafen was raised in the Lebensborn programme and told how a little disabled boy, Jürgen Weise, was taken from his mother and to a Kinderfachabteilung – children's department – in Brandenburg near Berlin. "There he was given tranquillisers and deliberately left untended and unfed. On 6th February 1942, the little boy died: he was eight months old", reported von Oelhafen.

Jürgen was far from the only victim. At least 147 children were killed in Brandenburg Kinderfachabteilung, and historians believe many of them were products of the Lebensborn programme.

## CHILDREN WERE RAISED ON NAZI SONGS

Mothers who gave birth to healthy children were usually allowed to keep their offspring, but they had to follow the regulations at their homes. Lebensborn concerned itself with the mother's physical well-being and her political views had to be kept in check too. Therefore, for as long as they were in the home, each woman had to attend courses in ideology three times a week. During the courses the women were introduced to propaganda films, read chapters from *Mein Kampf*, heard radio lectures and participated in singing Nazi war songs.

The staff were instructed to keep a close eye on the women and report back on them: their behaviour in daily life, the mothers' courage (or lack of) during the birth, and their views of Hitler and Nazism. For this purpose, each woman was provided with a so-called RF book. RF stood for Reichsführer, and after their stay the book was sent to Himmler in Berlin. The document provided a basis for the Nazi and his officials to determine whether the woman could use

## GOOD GERMANS SHOULD BE BRED

### 1935

**12TH DECEMBER**  
Lebensborn is founded as an organisation under the SS with its head office in Munich, a Nazi stronghold.

*The SS under Himmler ran the programme.*

### 1936

**AUGUST**  
In a letter circulated to members of the Nazi SS elite force, Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler personally encourages leaders of the organisation to become members of Lebensborn – which was initially Himmler's brainchild.

### 15TH AUGUST

The first Lebensborn home opens in Steinhöring, a small town outside of Munich. More homes follow and about 8,000 children are born and brought up under the programme in Germany.

*The home at Steinhöring near the Bavarian Alps was idyllic.*

## RACIAL PURITY



*In the quest for Aryan children sex outside of marriage was acceptable.*

### 1938

**SUMMER**  
Himmler calls on all police and SS men to have children with German women, whether they intend to marry the mother or not.







*Newborns underwent a special christening in the maternity homes where they were consecrated to the SS.*

## 1939

### OCTOBER

Nazis begin to kidnap children with particularly desirable racial features – typically blonde hair and blue eyes – from occupied countries, especially Czechoslovakia and Poland. The children are adopted by German families. The Nazis then erase all traces of the

kidnappings, without records historians can only guess at the number of abducted children. The highest estimate is around 250,000.

## 1940

### MAY

Max Sollmann – one of Hitler's most loyal associates – becomes manager of Lebensborn programme.



*Potential adoptive parents saw the children as commodities.*

## 1941

### AUTUMN

The first Lebensborn home opens in Norway, a country that the Nazis have chosen as suitable for

participating in the programme. Then homes or offices are opened in Austria, Poland, Denmark, France, Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg.

## 1942

### 10TH JUNE

Children from the town of Lidice in Czechoslovakia are kidnapped as part of the Lebensborn programme after their parents are killed in revenge for the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich.

### SUMMER

German soldiers are encouraged to bed

women in occupied countries. The regime promises to take care of children born under these circumstances.

## 1945

### SPRING

Allied troops liberate Lebensborn homes in Germany. Children are reunited with their birth parents only if investigators are able to determine their identity.



*Klækken Hotel northwest of Oslo was adapted as a Lebensborn home in 1942.*



## Nazis bred in Norway

Norwegian women were thought to have good genes and the regime wanted them to have as many children as possible with German soldiers.

**N**ordic women with blonde hair and blue eyes were popular with the Nazis. Therefore, Norway was selected as suitable to join the Lebensborn programme. About 12,000 children with a German father and Norwegian mother were born during the occupation.

After the war, the government tried to be rid of the children by sending them to Germany – unsuccessfully. An attempt to persuade Australia to buy children also went wrong, and many grew up in orphanages. The perception of Lebensborn children changed by the early 1960s, but many had suffered psychological damage.

the home a second time. At the same time Himmler personally managed the situation at the homes. The Reichsführer's office issued a stream of directives, not least about diet. And here Heinrich Himmler had quite firm opinions on the subject. The chefs were carefully instructed in how vegetables should be steamed, and Himmler insisted that pregnant women were given a daily dose of cod liver oil. In addition, the Reichsführer admonished staff that all pregnant women should be forced to eat porridge. When some of the women protested, citing that it would make them fat, Himmler retorted:

"I want them to be told that Englishmen, and particularly English Lords and Ladies, are virtually brought up on this kind of food. To consume it is considered most correct. For this reason, the mothers in our homes should get used to porridge, and be taught to feed their children on it. Heil Hitler!", the Reichsführer wrote in a letter dated 12th December, 1941.

Himmler also paid regular visits to homes to keep track of how mothers and children fared. His interest even went so far that babies born on Himmler's birthday, 7th October, were declared the Reichsführer's godchildren. Each child was given



*"Blessed for us every mother with good blood" was the motto on the Lebensborn's emblem.*

a silver cup engraved with Himmler and the child's name. The homes would then follow up with reports of the godchildren's development. In one of the reports Himmler read that Ingemar Kurt, born on 7th October, 1937, "is known to be well-developed and a strong, healthy lad". Gerlinde, born on the same date two years later, had contracted severe pneumonia, but was now recovered. "Gerlinde has overcome her severe illness well and is a bright child", was the message.

Before the children left home, they all went through the rite of baptism, which served as a sort of oath of loyalty to Hitler and SS. At a table covered with a swastika flag and a bust or a photo of Hitler, the mothers promised to bring up children to be good Nazis. The mother then surrendered the child to an SS officer who gave a form of blessing. The wording was different from home to home, but the content was similar:

"We believe in the God of all things. And in the mission of our German blood. Which grows ever young from German soil. We believe in the race, carrier of the blood. And in the Führer, chosen for us by God".

Then the officer held an SS dagger over the child and read a formal initiation into SS: "We take you into our community as a limb of our body. You shall grow up in our protection and bring honour to your name, pride to your brotherhood and inextinguishable glory to your race".

### CHILDREN WERE TAKEN FROM THEIR PARENTS

Despite the successes, Himmler recognised that Lebensborn homes could not deliver enough children to fulfil his great German dream. Even when German-speaking people in new areas such as Sudetenland were counted, the Third Reich's population did not reach more than 79 million – far short of Himmler's target of 120 million.

To further boost population numbers the Reichsführer gave soldiers in the occupied territories orders to kidnap children with Aryan looks.

Abductions were soon part of a carefully planned policy in areas to the east, especially in Poland. Some areas in Poland were cleared to make room for German families. The children were divided in two groups: boys and girls with Slavic features were deported to the east or served as slave labour. Children with an Aryan appearance could be Germans with all the accompanying privileges. The policy resulted in a hunt for fair-haired and blue-eyed children.

"I saw children being taken from their mothers, some were even torn from the breast. It was a terrible sight: the agony of the mothers and fathers, the beating by the Germans, and the crying of the children", said an eyewitness to the kidnapping operation in the town of Zamosc in the south of Poland in 1942.

4,445 out of 30,000 children deported from the Zamosc area were found suitable for taking into the



# Lebensborn spread

Soldiers in occupied countries were invited to bed local women, and the Lebensborn programme was extended so their children could be born safely. Norway had the most homes after Germany.

The name and date of birth was immediately set out on a card, which followed the baby.



## Bærum

The Godthaab home in Bærum near Oslo was **Norway's largest** with room for 165 children when it opened in 1942. In 1943 Godthaab grew to accommodate 250 children plus pregnant mothers.

STALHEIM  
KLÆKKEN  
BÆRUM  
**NORWAY**

## DENMARK

TØNDER  
COPENHAGEN

Lebensborn Home

SCHWANENEDE

BERLIN

## GERMANY

WERNIGERODE  
KOHREN-SAHLIS  
WIESBADEN  
SCHALKHAUSEN  
NORDRACH  
STEINHÖRING

## Steinhöring

Hochland in Steinhöring, Bavaria opened as the **first Lebensborn home** in August 1936 and was in operation for nine years until the end of the war. Hochland served as a model for other homes.

Staff at maternity homes were always German, even in occupied countries.



Lebensborn programme. The final selection took place in what the Nazis described as Kindererziehungslager – children's training camps. Here, boys and girls were checked for diseases and tested by a psychologist; their head shape, body type, hair and eye colour were all carefully recorded.

After assessment the children were classified into one of three categories: desirable, acceptable or undesirable. Among the characteristics that sent a child into the acceptable category was a round head shape, while tuberculosis or gypsy-like features could move him or her into the undesirable list.

To be stamped undesirable was effectively a death sentence. The children were sent to the extermination camps or killed onsite. Some were transported to centres around Poland, where they were used for experiments with drugs or sedatives. The Nazis covered up the deaths through forged papers that suggested the children had died from disease or illness caused by a heart condition.

### CHILDREN WERE OFFERED AS GOODS

The Nazis did everything to erase the past of those children chosen. They were usually told that their parents had died before everyone was given new, German-sounding names and sent to Germany. Here they were accommodated at a home where speaking Polish was strictly forbidden. Children who couldn't – or wouldn't – learn German, were sent back to

*Doctors from the SS stood sorting Polish children by their appearance.*

Poland. A similar fate befell boys and girls who continued to regard themselves as Poles.

Poles shared the fate of children from many other countries, including Czechoslovakia, Slovenia and parts of the Soviet Union. One such child was Alexander Litau from the Crimea. Alexander was just one year and ten months old when German troops invaded the peninsula in 1942. With his blonde hair and blue eyes the little boy was just what the Germans wanted and one day when some SS officers saw him playing in front of his parents' house, they took him.

At first Alexander was sent to Poland, where Nazi doctors made sure he was healthy and met all racial requirements. **The boy was extensively examined, so the doctors could be sure that he did not possess any "Jewish aspects".**

When Alexander was approved, he was sent to the Lebensborn home – Sonnenwiese ("Sunny Meadow") in Kohren-Sahlis, Saxony. Here the boy – now named Folker – was put up for adoption along with other children.

"My first memory is of being in a room with 30 other children. I remember these people coming in, while we were lined up like pet dogs to be chosen for a new home. The people were to be my parents. They went away and came back a day later. My 'mother' apparently wanted a girl, but my 'father' wanted a boy... I laid my head on his knee and that did it for him – I was to be their son", Folker remembered.

The process was not always painless. "The Nazi-faithful foster parents... selected the children they desired, almost like products from a catalogue. If the foster parents did not like us, it was also possible to return the child. So the child was simply a product, stolen goods", Folker later said about the procedure at the home.

### BEAR A CHILD FOR HITLER

Kidnapping and help for unmarried mothers were not the only methods used by the Nazis to increase the population. In an unofficial order sent to all members of the SS and police on 28th October, 1939, Himmler ordered the men to do their duty for the German nation by becoming fathers. It didn't matter whether they were married or not.

"Beyond the limits of bourgeois laws and conventions, which are perhaps necessary in other circumstances, it can be a noble task for German women and girls of good blood to become even outside marriage, not light-heartedly but out of a deep moral seriousness, mothers of the children of soldiers going to war of whom fate alone knows whether they will return or die for Germany", Himmler wrote.

At the same time, the Reichsführer assured the soldiers that he and his office would take care of both

### AN ARYAN'S REQUIREMENTS

- Blonde hair
- Blue or green eyes
- Tall, slender body with long legs
- No hereditary diseases

FACTS



*Each Christmas, children in Lebensborn homes were given a present from the government.*

mothers and children, for as long as the war lasted, or if the men fell in battle.

"SS-men and you mothers of these children... show that you are ready, through your faith in the Führer and for the sake of the life of our blood and our people, to regenerate life for Germany just as bravely as you know how to fight and die for Germany", he added.

Stories about sex within Nazi youth organisations had already circulated, but were now rekindled: the rumour was that the Lebensborn organisation facilitated sexual relations between honourable women and SS soldiers and the rumour caused an uproar.

Himmler tried to smooth things over, but only made things worse by saying that "we recommend only racially faultless men as conception assistants". Later the Reichsführer also clarified that the order obviously did not apply to the wives of police officers and soldiers. He also expressed great faith in the German women and believed he could decide himself if a potential mother had the appropriate allegiances and racial status – all without having any specific effect on the public.

### NORWEGIAN WOMEN HAD PERFECT GENES

When the storm subsided, the Führer extended the Lebensborn programme to occupied countries. Here the soldiers were invited to bed local "pure" women. If the visit resulted in a pregnancy, the future mothers were invited to the Lebensborn home, where the children could be born in safety. Homes were created in France, Norway, Denmark, Austria, Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg and Poland.

In Norway, the programme was implemented with great zeal by the occupying power: tall, blonde Norwegian women were very close to the Nazi ideal.

But despite the efforts of both Norway and Germany, it was eventually clear that Himmler and Hitler could not win the race. The war cost far more lives than even the most productive Lebensborn home could deliver, and slowly time ran out for the Nazis' thousand-year dream.

On 1st May, 1945 US forces reached the orphanage at Steinhöring. In the buildings soldiers found 300 children aged between six months and six years. In the weeks that followed American, British and Russian soldiers encountered homes filled with children throughout Germany. In most cases, the archives had been destroyed, so the task of finding the children's origins was almost impossible.

Some children never found out that they were adopted, while others discovered their origins by chance. The boy Folker was aware that he was adopted when one of his school friends told him that he was a "bastard".

As an adult Folker Heinecke investigated his roots and after over 30 years of searching found out that he was born in the Crimea as Alexander Litau. Unlike many other Lebensborn children Folker had not suffered any trauma from his rootlessness. He was obviously angry that the Nazis conducted the Lebensborn programme, but in return he didn't blame his German adoptive family:

"I had a good upbringing after the war. They believed in Nazism at the time, but they weren't war criminals and always did right by me."

## Children never returned home

**After the war the occupying powers in Germany made a great effort to return abducted children. But the task was almost impossible.**

As Allied forces approached from all sides in the war's final months, the people behind the Lebensborn programme hurried to destroy their records. Therefore, the authorities found it difficult to determine the number of children who had been taken to Germany, and which countries they came from.


Some historians believe that around a quarter of a million children were kidnapped. The Red Cross tried to reunite children with their biological parents, but were only successful with about 25,000 children. The rest grew up as Germans.

**250,000** children were kidnapped and taken to Germany, according to historians.  
**25,000** of the children were reunited with their families after the war.  
**20,000** children born in Germany and occupied countries in Lebensborn homes.



*Maternity homes were child factories that would produce more German citizens.*





*In the space of a few years, Heinrich Himmler built a cult that paid ostentatious tribute to Aryan origins.*



# HIMMLER'S OCCULT WORLD

Since World War II, rumours have spread about SS leader Heinrich Himmler's obsession with the occult. Himmler was preoccupied with the idea of creating an SS cult and ordered the Reich's scientists to the most remote corners of the world in search of the Aryans and the origin of the German people.

Dressed in parkas and sporting long beards the five Nazis looked nothing like typical clean-shaven SS officers in their stiff black uniforms. But the officers were also removed from the Black Order's usual operations: the men had been tasked with solving a mystery for SS-Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler.

Led by zoologist and SS-Untersturmführer Ernst Schäfer, with a long caravan of yaks and ponies laden with equipment trailing behind them, the Germans moved cautiously up a steep and winding path on the way toward a high mountain pass.

The 28-year-old scientist was a famous and seasoned explorer. He had participated in expeditions to Tibet on two previous occasions. But this time, his focus was not on animals: Schäfer and his team had a much more important task: Himmler was convinced that the Aryan race – the Germans – had their origins in Tibet. At the end of April 1938, therefore, the SS commander dispatched Schäfer and his four companions from Germany on a scientific expedition to the immense Himalayan mountains to prove his theory.

Since 1929, several German scientists had explored central Asia and Afghanistan's Hindu Kush region, and one of them had claimed to

have found a surprising number of people with blonde hair and blue eyes – in Himmler's eyes, they could only be talking about people of his own blood. Himmler also believed that the ancient Hindu scripture *Rigveda* – over 3,000 years old – contained clear references to an ancient sun god from Europe, and so considered the writing to be an important document regarding Nordic origins and the race's early presence in Asia.

Schäfer and his colleagues' task was to conduct racial and archaeological studies in Tibet's rugged terrain, where they would have to fight through ice and snow to accomplish their mission. Himmler hoped and expected in 1939 that Schäfer and his companions would return to the Third Reich with evidence that the Aryan race had been widespread throughout the region in ancient times. This tangible proof would reinforce Himmler's claim that the Aryans were an ancient people and had always been superior to any other race.

## Aryans fled from Atlantis

It was no surprise that Himmler had ordered the expedition. According to rumour, the brutal SS leader believed completely in the Aryans' almost mythological origin and also of the existence of Atlantis. He had set up his castle at Wewelsburg as a temple, where he conducted dark rituals, ➤

“ Schäfer and his colleagues' task was to conduct racial and archaeological studies in Tibet's rugged terrain.



dreamed of the Holy Grail and was impressed by ancient runes. Himmler's search for the occult was set in motion as early as 1935 when he'd established *Ahnenerbe* (Ancestral Heritage) – a special investigation unit tasked with researching Aryan roots and history. The institution's goal was “to promote the science of ancient intellectual history” under the motto: “A people live happily in the present and the future, so long as they are conscious of their past and the greatness of their ancestors.”

The idea was that the researchers – a prudent mix of scientists and scholars – would override traditional science and instead create a new image of the world, one where a tall, blonde-haired super race of modern Germans was descended from an ancient intelligent Aryan race that was superior to all other racial groups. Since the 19th century, there was widespread belief among German intellectuals that the Aryans had

their origins in Tibet. Here, in the Himalayas' hidden valleys, the Aryans lived peacefully in a distant past. But at some point the mountain idyll had been destroyed for unknown reasons, after which the tribe of tall, strong, blue-eyed people migrated across the world. Some went south and conquered the Indian subcontinent, others headed west, where they founded great empires until finally they reached Germany and Scandinavia's cold expanses.

It may seem odd that a talented, cynical and calculating man like Himmler was preoccupied with what was likely to be a fairy tale.

But the SS-Reichsführer had been always been fascinated in his ancestry. As a child, Himmler

had listened intensely to his parents when they read aloud from books on German history or about German and Nordic myths. He was especially captivated by the *Prose Edda* – a collection of two Medieval Icelandic literary works – with

“As a child, Himmler had listened intensely to his parents when they read aloud from books on German history or about German and Nordic myths

*The expedition leader Ernst Schäfer (fourth from the left) photographed in Tibet along with his team in 1938.*





## How the Nazis defined an Aryan



### EYE COLOUR

The Nazis' ideology was based on the fact that people can be divided into different races. The Aryan or Germanic race was primarily Nordic and was considered to be superior to any other. One particular feature was the eyes that were blue, blue-grey or grey – and often bright and penetrating.



### HEIGHT

According to the German eugenicist Hans FK Günther's definition from the 1920s, the Aryan race was slim and tall – its men had an average height of 1.74 metres. The ideal of a physically superior race was hailed in the film *Olympia*, which documented the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin.



### HAIR COLOUR

The word 'Aryan' comes from Sanskrit: 'arya', meaning 'noble', 'precious' or 'pure'. Another characteristic was the hair, which was light, smooth and silky. Although Adolf Hitler had dark hair, the Nazis used mainly blonde-haired men, women and children in their racial propaganda.



### NARROW FACE

Günther wrote that the race had elongated heads, with a significant distance between the front and the back, and had a long, narrow face. Even the skin was defined – as fair or light-coloured. The Nazis planned to implement racial policies to improve and refine the German – or Aryan – race.

its colourful gods like Thor, Freja and Loki, so he never forgot them. Fostering his increasing interest in history, Himmler's father had set aside an entire room in the family's Munich home as a shrine to the memory of the family's ancestors. This so-called *Ahnenzimmer* (Ancestry room)

filled up with heirlooms, pictures, Roman coins and an abundance of antiques. As Himmler grew up, his interest in history remained: the Nazi chief was obsessed with the past, and his all-consuming interest was the greatness of his German ancestors. He devoured historical novels and accounts of the bravery and heroism of his Aryan ancestors, the Germanic tribes.

Just like many other Nazis, he was convinced that pure Aryan blood had once flowed in the veins of ancient Germans, and he relied on Ahnenerbe's scientists to uncover the pearls of Aryan wisdom that must be out there somewhere for the benefit of the Third Reich.

This theory wasn't unique to Himmler. Its foundations could be found in a book on the fabled Atlantis, published by Austrian engineer (and mystic) Hanns Hörbiger in 1912. Here his analysis of glaciers led him to the theory of *Welteislehre* (World Ice Teachings), which claimed ice was the basic substance of all life.

The theory was as strange as it sounded, but for the Nazis it held one crucial point: the ideas dismissed Jewish scientist Albert Einstein's theory of relativity and thus provided an antithesis to Judaism itself.

According to Hörbiger, Aryans had arrived from the skies in sperm, encased in the cosmic ice of meteors. From here, a kind of white superhuman – Aryans – emerged who then, among other developments, founded Atlantis. This, according to Hörbiger, was located near Thule in Greenland. Even Christ was considered to be a direct descendant of the Atlanteans who, after the fall of Atlantis, fled through the Gobi Desert to the Himalayan valleys. 850,000 years ago, his argument went, before the flood and escape to the Roof of the World, these superhumans had ►





## Symbolism | SS Honour ring

**SPECIAL GIFT** The death's head ring was Himmler's personal gift to those selected for his SS corps.



**RUNES**  
Four runes are engraved in the ring. The rune symbol to the left of the skull symbolises the power of the sun.

**DEATH'S HEAD** The symbol indicates that the wearer of the ring does not fear death, but embraces it.

built an extremely advanced civilisation with both planes and electricity.

In contrast to the white Aryan super race stood the "subhuman" blacks, Jews and Mongols, all of whom were in an eternal conflict with the almighty white race. The bizarre theory was readily accepted by both Hitler and Himmler. The SS-Reichsführer was so convinced that he tried to enforce this theory onto schools and universities instead of Darwin's Theory of Evolution.

This belief was the reason why five supposedly Atlantean descendants found themselves in the Himalayas many thousands of years later looking for traces of their ancestors from a golden age.

Wearing a pith helmet with SS runes, the Germans travelled across the border into Tibet, where only a few Europeans could gain entry. Then the unheard of happened: the expedition was given permission from the Tibetan regent to visit the capital, Lhasa, where few foreigners and no Germans had ever set foot before.

### The natives were measured

Among Schäfer's research group was anthropologist Bruno Beger, who was the epitome

of the Nazi Aryan ideal with his 185-cm tall athletic body, blonde hair and blue eyes. The expedition's racial expert was set to the task of looking for fossil remains from early Aryans while also logging and comparing similarities between the Aryan race and the Tibetan locals. Beger took his task very seriously: whenever he encountered a research subject in the guise of a native on the expedition's way through the wild mountain terrain, he went into action. He cut off locks for hair samples, measured the distance between eyebrows – and even logged the curve on fingernails.

Skull shape was a reliable marker of the Aryan race, so he also took hundreds of facial measurements and made masks of local Tibetans showing their face shape and features in detail for later racial-anthropological determination.

Often, the research subjects were terrified when Beger started his work: first, he brushed their head with oil, then covered the entire face with a thick mass of plaster. The 'victims' then had to sit and wait for the mask to dry – with straws hanging from their nostrils so they could breathe.

### Himmler received returning heroes

During the expedition, Beger photographed almost 2,000 natives, measured 376 people and took casts of 17. When the Tibetan expedition team landed in Germany on 4th August, 1939 on Himmler's private plane, which had taken the men on the final leg of their journey from Vienna to Munich, a warm reception awaited them.

Himmler was ready on the runway to welcome his brave scientists who, on the same day, were flown to Berlin for a huge reception. Although Beger had to spend more time analysing his data, he informed Himmler that he believed that he had identified Nordic traits in the Tibetan upper classes. His records revealed that Tibetan nobility were often tall, with a narrow face and straight hair.

These conclusions were naturally welcomed by the SS leader, who could then enjoy an unconditional propaganda success: on 5th August, 1939, and in the following days, the German newspapers informed the population about the expedition under such excited headlines as the "SS Tibet Expedition" and "The first Germans in Lhasa". This was precisely the kind of positive press that Hitler's staff craved during these troubled times, as the Führer turned his gaze towards Poland where everyone could hear the drums of war starting to rumble.

However, when the Nazi scientists' results were finalised, the conclusion didn't substantiate the theory of an early Aryan presence on Tibet. ►



# Himmler wanted to grow his cult in an old, triangular castle

The Renaissance castle near the German city of Paderborn was designated as the heart of the SS cult and a spiritual gathering point for Himmler's specially selected men.

In 1934 Himmler leased Wewelsburg Castle at Paderborn from the local authorities for just one Reichsmark a year for a period of 100 years. Even before the lease was signed, Himmler had sent SS architect Hermann Bartels to draw up plans for an extensive rebuild and expansion of the castle, which would become the Black Order's religious heart and the centre of their universe.

Here in central Germany, Himmler could cultivate his fascination with the Holy Grail and

Atlantis and the castle was carefully prepared for that purpose.

According to Himmler's wishes, the walls were decorated with symbolic runes, and in addition to its many rooms, there was a crypt, meeting

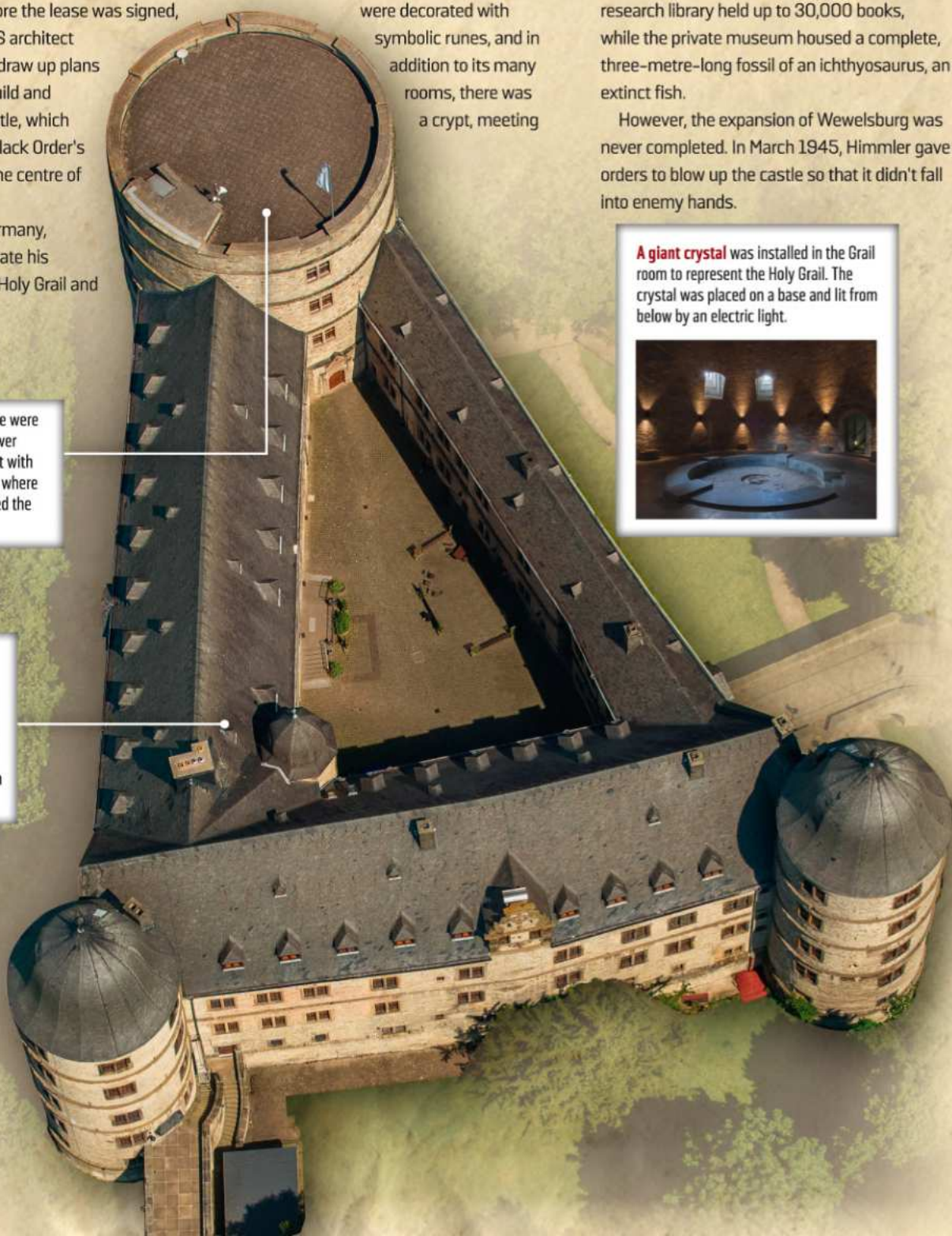
rooms, a colonnade, a Grail room and a study for Himmler, plus a huge wine cellar with space for around 40,000 bottles. The castle's research library held up to 30,000 books, while the private museum housed a complete, three-metre-long fossil of an ichthyosaurus, an extinct fish.

However, the expansion of Wewelsburg was never completed. In March 1945, Himmler gave orders to blow up the castle so that it didn't fall into enemy hands.

**In the north tower** there were three chambers. The lower one incorporated a crypt with a dome-shaped ceiling, where a giant swastika adorned the centre of the dome.

**The castle was triangular**, and the triangular tip where the north tower stood faced north – which according to Himmler pointed towards the lost kingdom of Atlantis.

**A giant crystal** was installed in the Grail room to represent the Holy Grail. The crystal was placed on a base and lit from below by an electric light.





On the other hand, the data revealed that the Tibetans hadn't lived in isolation, but for many millennia had been in contact with many other peoples and were therefore a melting pot of many different ethnicities.

Himmler remained convinced by the Aryan theory and insisted that all human culture and all human scientific progress was the sole result of his proud Aryan heritage.

He considered himself to be a true German – some argue he even believed that he was the reincarnation of the first German king Henry the Fowler, who founded the medieval German state (previously known as East Francia) in 919. The SS called Himmler “*König Heinrich*” (King Henry), and Himmler regularly had conversations with the long-dead regent who, in his eyes, was both the political and human precursor to his great idol, Hitler.

On 2nd July, 1936, on the 1,000th anniversary of his death, Himmler commemorated the first German king at a memorial ceremony in Quedlinburg in the east of the Harz, which was King Henry's first seat of power and capital of the East Francia kingdom. At Himmler's command, the town's church was stripped of all Christian paraphernalia in the run up to the memorial feast and was instead decorated with banners covered with SS runes and swastikas.

All this was part of Himmler's attempt to create a place of worship for the SS, a pagan Mecca where

both members and ordinary citizens could flock to honour his German organisation. In 1937 his vision became one big step closer to being realised, as following several years of intensive searching, archaeologists found some skeletal remains near the church and close to the king's empty grave. Immediately, the bones were proclaimed to be King Henry's earthly remains. The bones were placed in a sarcophagus and reburied in the church's crypt in a ceremony on 2nd July, 1937.

“Himmler was ready on the runway to welcome his brave scientists who, on the same day, were flown to Berlin for a huge reception.”

### The Black Order grew

After Himmler was appointed SS-Reichsführer in 1929, he'd successfully fought to create an organisation that was the pride and racial elite of the Nazi party.

With Hitler's blessing he'd set special criteria for admission to the corps, which was also known as the Black Order. Since 1931, a special office within the *Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt der SS* (Race and Settlement Office) had been given the task of evaluating the ancestry, abilities and character of the many candidates, and at the offices in Munich, assessors scrutinised the aspiring candidates' faces and physicality.

The appraisers were looking for traits that the Nazis regarded as Nordic: a long skull, a narrow face, thin lips, a tall and slim body, blue eyes and blonde hair. Only men who met these strict requirements and, moreover, could provide evidence of their Aryan heritage, became a part of Himmler's elite organisation.

The first ... SS | 1923

## Hitler was given a bodyguard

At the beginning of 1923, a group of eight men swore they would defend Adolf Hitler, who was the leader of the German Nazi party, with their lives. The bodyguards called themselves *Stabswache* and each wore a black cap adorned with a silver skull – an insignia that would later become the SS's hallmark.

In May 1923, the bodyguard unit changed its name to *Stoßtrupp-Hitler* (Shock Troop-Hitler) and comprised around 100 members, all of whom were Hitler loyalists. In 1925 Hitler created a new corps of bodyguards, the so-called SS, an abbreviation for *Schutzstaffel* (Protection Squadron). Four years later, Himmler was appointed as the head of the SS. At that time, the elite organisation had around 280 men, but under Himmler the Corps grew rapidly and their role as Hitler's personal bodyguard ceased.



Adolf Hitler with SS bodyguards in 1925. From left Julius Schaub, Julius Schreck, Hans Maurer and Edmund Schneider.



Those selected could look forward to wearing a black uniform with silver stripes on the collar, designed by Hugo Boss, along with a cap sporting a silver skull. Himmler's vision was that one day the SS would be the root of a new, pureblood Nordic race.

Shortly after the Nazis seized power in 1933, the Reichsführer began putting plans together to establish a SS school, a secluded cult and meeting place for high-ranking SS members. Here, Himmler's racial elite would learn to think like the Aryans of old and be stimulated intellectually so that the new Aryan breed were suitably equipped to take their place in history. Himmler dreamed of a huge castle in a magical place for his school and found the perfect location

in Westphalia near Paderborn. Here stood the 17th-century Wewelsburg Castle, in the middle of idyllic forests and small ravines.

In early November 1933, Himmler visited the castle for the first time and immediately fell in love with it. The building's thick walls rose imposingly over the hilly landscape, a perfect setting for the Black Order's stronghold.

But first and foremost, the SS leader noted the site's distinctive architecture: the layout was uniquely designed as a triangle, where one tip pointed to high north, the place where Himmler believed Atlantis to be located, and from where – according to legend – its population had fled to Tibet. Himmler immediately leased the castle from the local authorities and gave SS ►

*The Tibetans' facial features were accurately measured and noted, and the reports subsequently analysed back in Germany. The purpose was to prove a lineage with the Aryan race.*



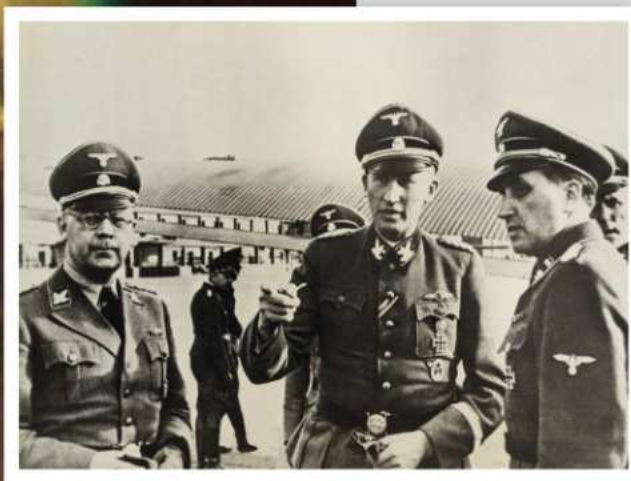




“ The building's thick walls rose imposingly over the hilly landscape, a perfect setting for the Black Order's stronghold.



*Heinrich Himmler called his SS Corps the Black Order. The loyal men were part of a cult that became increasingly bizarre.*



architect Hermann Bartels the task of rebuilding and expanding the castle. Himmler's plans were constantly changing and became increasingly extravagant and ostentatious: a cult space would

be created to worship the Nordic god Odin, and one of the rooms would be renovated and dedicated to the Holy Grail. The Reichsführer-SS's wish list grew constantly: a private museum, wine cellar, domed room with a gigantic swastika across the ceiling, a treasury where Himmler could store, among other things, the *Totenkopf* (death's head) rings from fallen SS men, a huge

library, and a crypt devoted to Henry I. To realise his plans, Himmler established a concentration camp nearby in 1939, so he didn't run the risk of running out of manpower for his monumental building project.

### **Researchers examined rock carvings**

In order for Wewelsburg to become a success as an SS leadership and ideological training centre, the Reichsführer wanted further research done into the Aryans' lost history and religion to piece it all back together. According to Himmler, it would then be possible for the SS to recreate the golden age of its Nordic past in its full glory, but this could only happen once his researchers had discovered more about the Aryan past.

From the research institute at Ahnenerbe's head office in Berlin, Himmler dispatched expeditions to all corners of the world to search for traces of the Aryans' glorious past. Typically, legends and myths were the driving force behind the numerous expeditions. Himmler was deeply fascinated by both, because he considered them to be much more than simple stories – he believed they contained Aryan wisdom.

In 1936, for example, he sent his scientists to Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland to find traces of early Aryans. In the Nordic countries, the researchers studied rock carvings such as prehistoric symbols and signs that were scratched into rocks and caves. The German scientists believed that the rock carvings were the world's oldest examples of the written word – a now-extinct Aryan written language that was the basis for cuneiform, hieroglyphs and ►



## Symbolism | SS Honour dagger



the alphabet. All they had to do was decode the symbols, a task that the scientists, under the leadership of Dutch professor Herman Wirth, struggled in vain to complete.

One of Wirth's grand ideas was that the Nordic race developed in Thule in Greenland, which had once been a "verdant, unspoiled paradise". In the eyes of the Dutchman, Thule was synonymous with the lost Atlantis. But even though Wirth investigated the world's geological and archaeological sites, he couldn't find any evidence of an early Nordic civilisation. Wirth's ideas were rejected and ridiculed by the German archaeological establishment, he was criticised by the Führer and Himmler was far from satisfied with his progress. As time went on, he lost faith in the professor who had helped found Ahnenerbe, but who was a gullible man who constantly exceeded his budget and failed to deliver.

When Wirth returned to Berlin after his Scandinavian expedition he was given the cold shoulder and Himmler was forced to admit that if Wirth had not had the protection of the SS he would undoubtedly have ended up in a prison or labour camp. As a direct consequence of Hitler's stinging criticism, in 1937, Himmler stripped Wirth of his role as director of Ahnenerbe and forbade him to publish books or to give lectures in its name.

### Thor's hammer must be resurrected

Ahnenerbe's inability to provide any scientific breakthroughs didn't put Himmler off, however. He remained hungry for anything and everything that was shrouded in mysticism and the occult. In

particular, he was fascinated by the Icelandic *Edda*, which he regarded as one of the richest sources of Aryan intellectual history. He was drawn to the tales of Thor and his hammer, Mjöltnir, which was described as the most powerful and accurate weapon in the world. Seen through Himmler's eyes, the hammer was undoubtedly a prehistoric electric weapon akin to a light sabre, developed by Aryans of course.

Himmler's hope was that the scientists in Ahnenerbe could create a similar weapon for German soldiers so they could crush the enemies of the Third Reich. In a letter to them he asked:

"Research where in all of North-Germanic Aryan culture the concept of the lightning flash, the thunderbolt, Thor's hammer, or the hammer thrown or flying through the air appears. Also, where there are sculptures of a god holding an axe and appearing in a flash of lightning."

He was convinced that it was "not natural lightning and thunder, but rather a case of an earlier, highly developed weapon our forefathers had possessed".

In Himmler's opinion, the future of the SS depended on an in-depth understanding of the past, including the studies of legends and myths, so he had a good feeling when he met medieval researcher and archaeologist Otto Rahn, who had dedicated his life to finding the Holy Grail.

According to medieval writings, the Holy Grail is the cup that Christ drank from at the Last Supper, and which was later used by Joseph of Arimathea to catch his blood at the crucifixion.

In the 12th century, the hunt began for the relic, which had become a symbol of supreme insight. According to Rahn, the legend of the Grail had Aryan origins, and he claimed that anyone

“He [Himmler] was drawn to the tales of Thor and his hammer, Mjöltnir, which was described as the most powerful and accurate weapon in the world.”





# Chemical ink analysis identifies age

When scientists investigate the authenticity of a diary, part of their examination includes looking at the ink, which is subjected to chromatographic analysis.

In a Russian military archive in the town of Podolsk south of Moscow in 2013, historians found Himmler's diaries, which were seized by the Red Army in 1945. The diaries cover the years 1937–1938 and 1944–1945, and contain an incomprehensible mix of family pleasantries and mass murder – for example, a telephone conversation with his daughter Gudrun in the morning, his presence at the mass murder of Jewish women and children in the afternoon and dinner with SS officers in the evening.

Unlike Hitler's diaries, which were published by the German newspaper *Bild* in 1983, Himmler's diaries were considered genuine. The books were largely authenticated by their ink. With a special technique called chromatography, scientists analysed the colour composition of the ink and, with quite high precision, determined whether the ink was made in the 1930s and 1940s. The diary's paper, handwriting and covers were also subjected to vigorous investigations, and the conclusion was unambiguous: the diaries belonged to Heinrich Himmler.

## Scientists focus on three things:

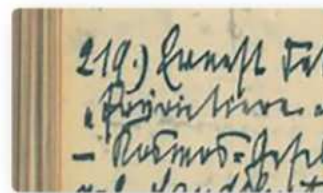
### The cover

**1** By analysing the cover material, scientists can determine when a book was produced. Artificial leather with a content of polyester, for example, first appeared on the market in 1953.



### Handwriting

**2** By comparing the diary records with, for example, validated letters written by the person in question, experts can determine whether the manuscript is genuine.



### The paper and ink

**3** Chemical analysis reveals the paper's make-up and thus whether the material contains substances that do not match the date. For example, a fabric such as 'optical white' was not used before 1955.

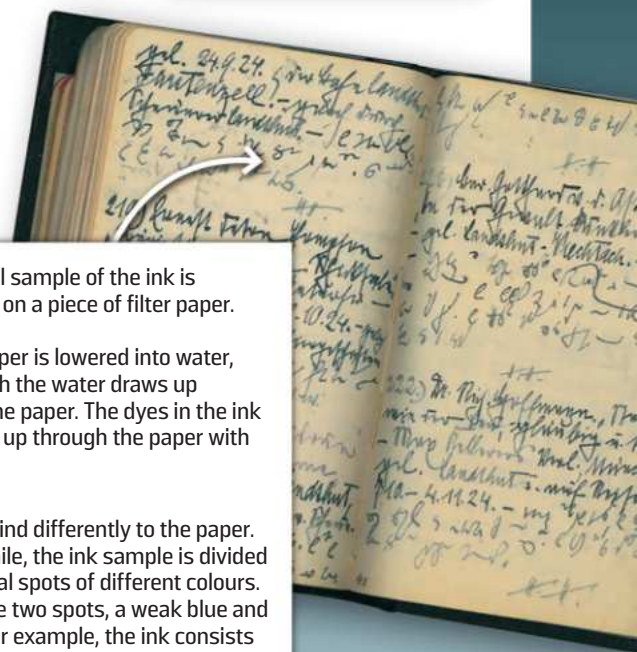
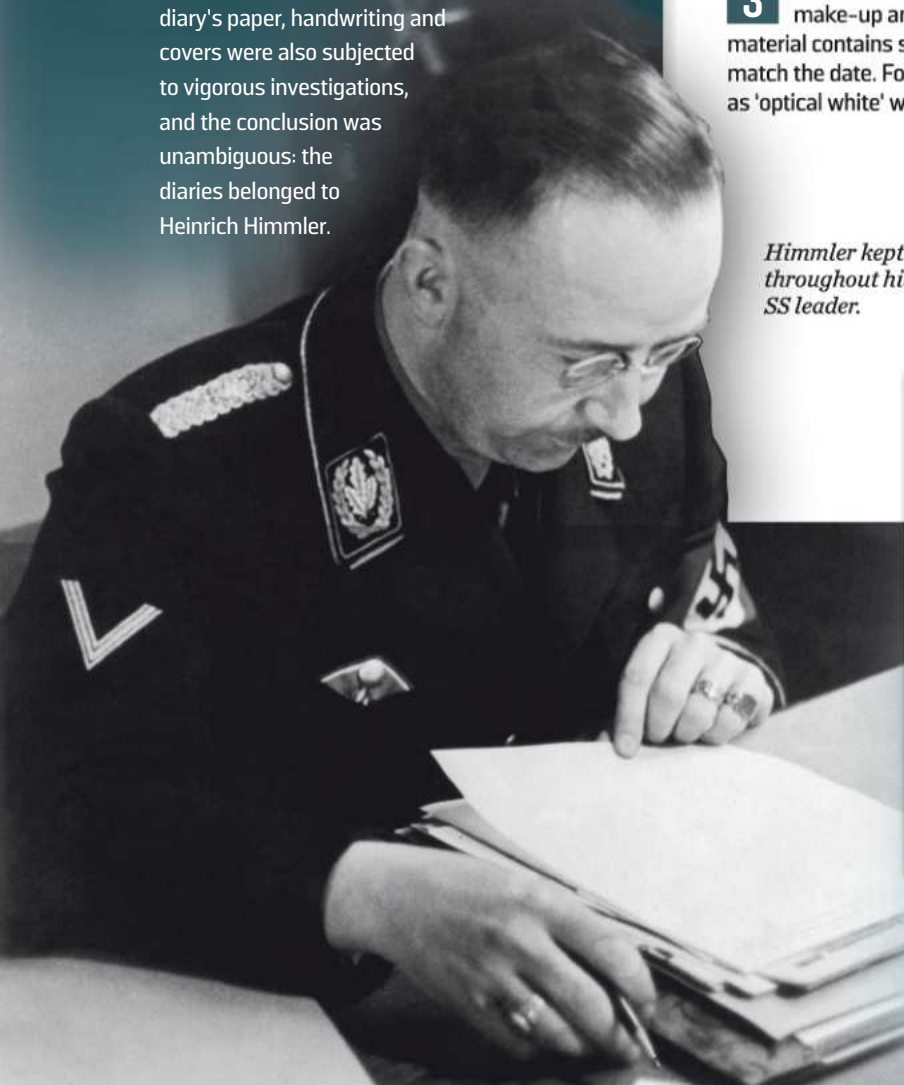


Himmler kept a diary throughout his time as SS leader.

**A** A small sample of the ink is deposited on a piece of filter paper.

**B** The paper is lowered into water, after which the water draws up through the paper. The dyes in the ink are drawn up through the paper with the water.

**C** Dyes bind differently to the paper. After a while, the ink sample is divided into several spots of different colours. If there are two spots, a weak blue and a violet, for example, the ink consists of at least two different dyes. The dyes are then assessed and compared with dyes that existed in 1945.





## Symbolism | Headwear



who caught sight of it would gain eternal life. Generations of researchers and hopeful amateur treasure hunters had dreamed of the Grail and hunted everywhere for the elusive prize. But Rahn believed he knew exactly where the Grail was hidden: in the ruins of Montségur Castle, located on an inaccessible mountain peak in the French Languedoc region.

The castle was the last bastion of the Cathars, a Christian sect, and was where they allegedly guarded their most precious treasure. In 1244, a thousand-strong army of Catholic bishops and royal forces stormed the castle and burned the Cathars on the stake. According to legend, a small group of Cathar monks fled through secret passages with the Grail.

### Book about Grail was bestseller

Otto Rahn was convinced that the Holy Grail was still hidden somewhere in the ruins of the Montségur Castle, and in 1931 he led an expedition to the site, but it was in vain. In 1933, he wrote a book *Crusade Against the Grail*, and this particular work aroused Heinrich Himmler's attention.

The SS sent a telegram in 1933 offering Rahn 1,000 Reichsmark to write a second book about

the search for the Grail – and as part of the agreement sent Rahn on what was probably the most thankless task a researcher could be exposed to: finding the fabled treasure.

Rahn, who was an openly gay liberal with no anti-Semitic views, joined the SS and donned the order's black uniform. Again he travelled to France and even to Italy and Iceland in search of the Grail, but returned home empty-handed. In 1937, in order to buy himself some time, he published another book, in which he documented his crusade. The work was filled with pseudoscientific claims and mystic references, yet Himmler loved the book and ordered 5,000 copies, bound in the finest leather, which he gave to the Nazi top brass, including Hitler.

When Rahn read the printed book, he discovered to his discomfort that an anti-Semitic section had been added, which he – who himself had Jewish ancestry – had no knowledge of.

Shortly after the book was published, Rahn was assigned to a three-month posting as a guard at the concentration camp in Dachau, because he has been caught in the act of sex with another

man. His experiences in the camp shocked and frightened him and, ashamed of the true nature of the Nazi regime, he wrote to a friend: "I have much sorrow in my country, impossible for a tolerant, liberal man like me to live in a nation that my native country has become."

Deeply upset, he resigned from the SS in 1939, and although Himmler had no intention of letting him go so easily. The SS was not an organisation that you could simply walk away from. When Rahn learned that Himmler's henchmen were breathing down his neck, he climbed a snow-capped mountain peak in Tyrol, Austria, where on 13th March, 1939 – unsurprisingly – he was found dead, having frozen to death aged just 35 years old.

Himmler had put so much confidence in Rahn finding the Grail that he'd dedicated a whole room to it in his Castle in Wewelsburg. But during the course of 1939, events occurred that overtook Himmler's disappointment of not having the Grail.

In September, Germany invaded Poland, war broke out, and the SS-Reichsführer became busier than ever before as he organised the extermination of the Jews, and would soon enter history as the architect of the Holocaust, the Nazi genocide of six million Jews during World War II. ■





## WHAT WE KNOW FOR SURE

### Himmler was hunting Aryan origins.

- Himmler believed that the **Holy Grail existed** and was hidden in France.
- The Reichsführer sent expeditions in **search of Aryan origins**.
- Wewelsburg Castle was leased by the SS and set up as a centre for a cult, where they could cultivate Nordic mythology.
- **Members of the SS cult** believed that Atlantis was more than a myth – a real place that had existed thousands of years ago.

# 5,000

members were in Himmler's 'Black Guard' – the earliest SS members who enjoyed special privileges and were recipients of the special death's head ring.



## WHAT WE STILL DON'T KNOW

### Did Otto Rahn commit suicide?

**1** Otto Rahn, who hunted the Holy Grail unsuccessfully, fell out of favour with Himmler and was soon found dead on a mountainside in the

Austrian Tyrol. Officially Rahn committed suicide, but a large number of historians doubt that was the case; instead, they believe that Rahn was murdered.

### Where did Himmler's belief in the occult come from?


**2** Historians still have doubts about why Himmler cultivated the occult. We know that from childhood Himmler was preoccupied with old legends and especially the Nordic race's mythology, which created the foundation for his strong conviction. In addition, it's very likely that he also saw the possibilities of using the stories to build a strong and loyal cult around him.

### Did Himmler believe in Atlantis?

# 3

It's impossible to conclude whether Himmler really believed in the myth of Atlantis or whether he was simply intent on strengthening the belief of the Aryan race as superhuman.

Specifically, he sent expeditions in search of Aryan origins, including Atlantis. We know that Himmler wanted to create a new religion, worshipping both the Sun and old Nordic gods. Nevertheless, the whole staging of Aryan worship could easily be part of a wider plan to secure the Nazis' legitimacy by creating a cult and convincing the Germans of the superiority of their race.



*Atlantis was first mentioned in the works of Greek philosopher Plato Critias and Timaeus.*



*He was the grandson of an opera composer – and Hitler's absolute favourite. The ice-cold, Aryan, fencing virtuoso, Reinhard Heydrich, crushed all rivals and destroyed any resistance to Nazism. At the top of his career, he devised the "Final Solution" – the extermination of Europe's Jews.*



**REINHARD  
HEYDRICH**

# HITLER'S BLOND EXECUTIONER





# DE

**Over 11 years Reinhard Heydrich exterminated his political opponents and the Jews with alarming efficiency.**

POLFOTO/ULLSTEIN BILD & BPK

Imm. Reinhard, Tristan Eugen Heydrich  
Feb. 7, marzo 1904

## **Responsible: Reinhard Heydrich**

**Birthplace:** Halle (Eastern Germany), son of a music school principal.

**Crime:** was quickly Heinrich Himmler's most trusted man and second-in-command. Responsibilities incl. the SD intelligence service and organising the Wannsee Conference (1942), which planned the extermination of the Jews. Governor of Prague.

**Fate:** Dies after an assassination attempt in Prague on June 4, 1942.



AF THOMAS HEBGAARD

**T**he May sun beats down on Jozef Gabčík. For more than an hour, the 30 year-old Czech has been waiting impatiently at a tram stop in the Lieben suburb, north of Prague. The morning heat is so sizzling hot that the sweat trickles down, making Gabčík's clothes sticky. Yet he has taken a raincoat, which is hung over his arm. Under the jacket Gabčík hides a machine gun.

The English produced Sten Gun Mk II FF 209 is to be used to kill the head of the Gestapo, Reinhard Heydrich. In the past year, the hated, German top Nazi has controlled Bohemia and Moravia – what is now the Czech Republic – with cynical brutality. Today he will die.

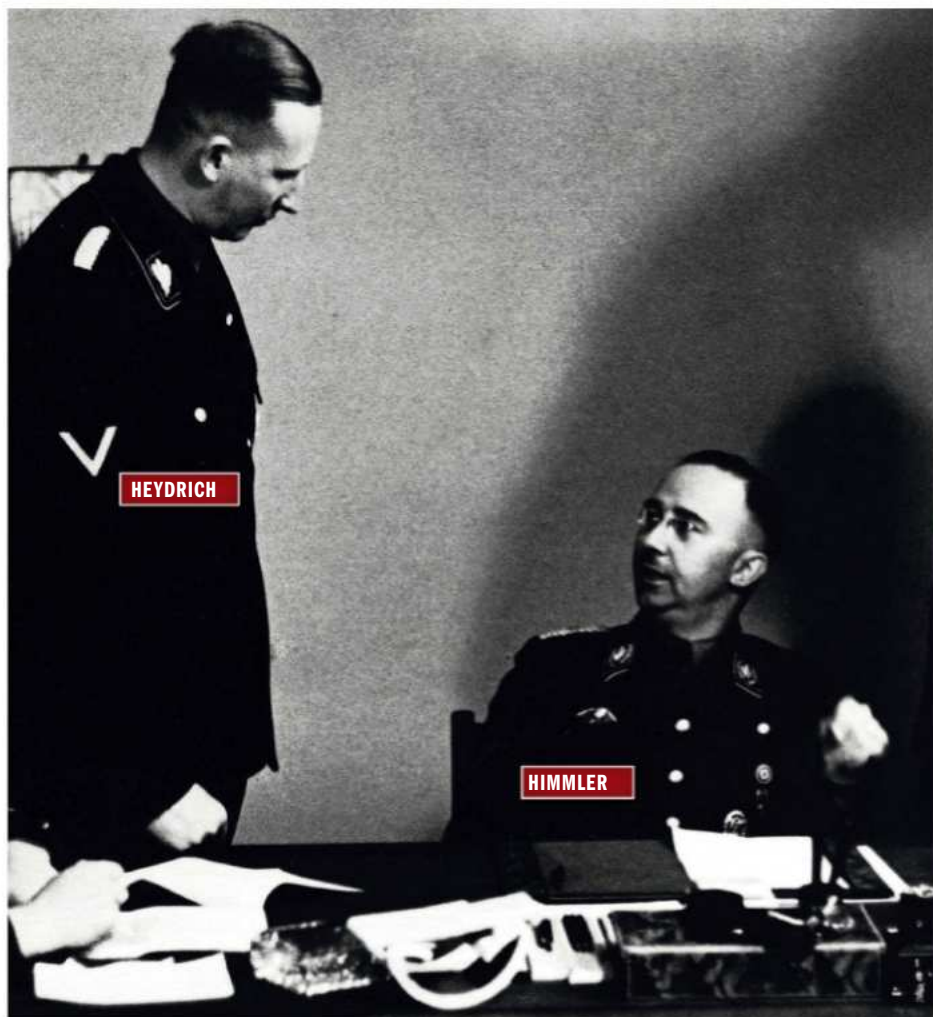
On the opposite pavement, leans Jan Kubis, relaxed, against a lamppost. The 28 year-old resistance fighter carries a suitcase containing two bombs. There is nothing else for the two men to do but wait. Sooner or later Heydrich's black Mercedes convertible will emerge, because, according to reliable intelligence, Hitler's henchman is to drive here this morning.

Reinhard Tristan Eugen Heydrich is at the pinnacle of his Nazi career. As second-in-command of the SS and head of both the SD intelligence service and the Gestapo, 38 year-old Heydrich has carved out a central role for himself in the Third Reich's top leadership. He is also Reich Protector for Bohemia and Moravia, where he has installed himself in Prague's former royal castle, overlooking the city.

Suddenly the two partisans see a flash of light: the long-awaited signal coming from the street further on, where the watchman, Josef Valčík, has been looking out for Heydrich for the last hour.

It is 10:30 on May 27, 1942, and suddenly everything happens very quickly. Gabčík sprints across the street to Kubis, just as a tram stops to drop off passengers.

And then the black Mercedes convertible 320 with the license plate SS-3 comes into view. To the relief of the resistance men



**SS chief Heinrich Himmler feared his blazingly intelligent second-in-command, but Heydrich's findings and ideas were indispensable for the Nazis.**

only the driver and the tall, blonde Reinhard Heydrich are in the Mercedes. The German is sitting quietly in the backseat of the car.

The sharp curve where Kubis and Gabčík are located, forces the driver to slow down. When the car is only 3 metres away, Gabčík throws off the raincoat, takes the machine gun and pulls the trigger. But nothing happens. The weapon is clogged with bits of vegetables, which had been in his pocket.

While the Czech fumbles frantically with his weapon, Heydrich orders his driver to stop. Without fear, he gets up from the back seat of the open car, pulls out his gun and aims directly at Gabčík. The Gestapo chief pulls the trigger, but

nothing happens. Only a hollow click. The gun is not loaded.

## The navy dismisses Heydrich

The story of the “blond beast” and his way to the top of the Nazi hierarchy starts far from the Czech capital, and with a significantly less cocksure Reinhard Heydrich.

In spring 1931, the then 27 year-old German's life falls apart completely. He locks himself in his room in his parents' home in the south German city of Halle for several days in a row, as he cries from anger and self-pity at the injustice to which he has been exposed. A woman is claiming that Heydrich promised her marriage. However, he believes he is within his right to leave this woman in favour of the nubile, passionate Nazi, Lina von Osten.

At a military court of honour, Heydrich denies having promised his jilted girlfriend anything, and he arrogantly declares his total lack of understanding at the court's

## HEYDRICH THE BRAIN BEHIND THE SA's OBLITERATION

As head of the Gestapo Heydrich earmarked those SA leaders to be punished during “the night of long knives” June 30, 1934 – incl. Ernst Röhm (photo).





interference in what he, as an officer, should and should not do. This attitude does not sit well with the naval governors, and the young naval lieutenant's dreams of a naval career collapse when the navy dismisses him.

The atmosphere in his parents' home only makes the young Heydrich even more depressed. The bourgeois family has been hit hard by the 1930 economic crisis. His father is too sick to work, and his once-renowned music conservatory in Halle is losing its governmental authorisation. Absolutely unheard of before, his mother has to do the housework herself and, at the same time, provide for the family's three adult children by giving piano lessons to the offspring of the middle classes.

### Works for 120 marks a month

For months Reinhard Heydrich and Lina von Osten mull, in distress over their fate. Heydrich's mother, who is deeply concerned at seeing her son so depressed, provides the solution.

Through a friend she learns that the National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP) is looking for a man for Hitler's bodyguard, the SS. A position – not unimportant – that will give little “Reini” the chance to wear a beautiful, black SS uniform

Heydrich immediately joins the Nazi party as membership is a prerequisite to be considered for the job, and on Lina's 20th birthday, June 14, he travels to Munich to meet the head of the SS, Heinrich Himmler. For Lina, it is “the most glorious day of my life, our lives”.

Himmler welcomes him to his small poultry farm on the outskirts of Munich and is instantly impressed by Heydrich's tall, blonde “Aryan” appearance. He gives his young guest 15 minutes to solve a problem: Heydrich is to write down how he would organise the party's future intelligence service.

It is here that it first dawns on Heydrich what the vacant position really entails, but he throws himself into the task and pairs his experience of the German Navy with the intelligence methods he has learned about from reading British spy novels.

Himmler is greatly satisfied: “Good, I will take you,” is 30 year-old Himmler's brief

acknowledgement. And the two men agree on a modest starting salary of 120 Reichsmark.

### Information on everyone

In the early 1930s, Hitler's party is plagued by infighting, which Heydrich quickly learns to use to his own advantage. From his small office in the party headquarters in Munich, where, for the first few months, he has to share the typewriter with another party functionary, he tirelessly collects useful information about the Nazi party's friends and foes.

In the beginning, Heydrich's intelligence on selected individuals is written on a few paper cards in a cigar box, but over the next three years, the

## HEYDRICH MODEL IN THE THIRD REICH

Heydrich's Aryan appearance earned him a hero status in the Third Reich. He appeared as a fashion model in books about the proper Nazi salute and Nazi uniforms.



box grows into a huge and well-organised book that makes him the most well-informed Nazi in 1934.

He knows the most embarrassing personal episodes from Hitler's childhood. He knows about Goebbels' sexual excesses, about Göring's morphine addiction and the stomach cramps Himmler tries to hide in an attempt to appear invulnerable and strong.

Heydrich possesses compromising information on almost everyone, which can

be used at a later date, if necessary. The first time it really comes into use is shortly after Hitler's takeover in 1933. Heydrich's SD intelligence service creates the Nazis' first concentration

## SS EXECUTIONER RELAXED WITH FENCING AND PLAYING THE VIOLIN

The feisty workaholic Heydrich found peace in his two passions: sabre fencing and moments alone with his beloved violin.

Despite often working 16 hours a day, Reinhard Heydrich still found time to cultivate his two greatest passions – sabre fencing and music.

Heydrich was the star of the German fencing team in 1941. In fact he loved his sport so much that it caused him to show extremely rare glimpses of mercy, for example, he helped the Jewish former German fencing master Paul Sommer flee to the United States. And when Germany invaded Poland, he immediately sent express instructions that no members of Poland's Olympic fencing team were to be hurt.

While his fencing skills were learned, Heydrich's second major interest, music, was almost etched into his birth certificate. One of his middle names, Tristan, came from Wagner's opera “Tristan and Isolde” and his second middle name, Eugen, came from Heydrich's grandfather, who founded the world-famous music academy in Dresden. Despite his

musical origins and unmistakable skill as a violinist, Reinhard Heydrich never chose to bet on music as a career, instead it acted more as a refuge. Colleagues often found Heydrich in his backyard, wearing his shiny black SS uniform, and completely lost to the world, while he masterfully played his violin.



Heydrich was one of the stars of the German fencing team.

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## HEYDRICH LEADER OF THE EINSATZ- GRUPPEN

Heydrich was leader of the feared death squad that executed at least half a million Jews, Gypsies and Soviet partisans in the east.



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is taken to Gestapo headquarters in Berlin and shot before the eyes of Reinhard Heydrich. The other prisoners hear the Gestapo chief exclaim: "Is he not dead yet? Let the bastard bleed!" With those words Heydrich leaves his former party colleague mortally wounded in a cell to die.

### Feared and friendless

This situation is typical for Heydrich, who is not building his career by creating personal relationships. Instead, he pushes his way to the top through his hard work. He always makes

sure to be one step ahead – particularly in relation to Himmler, who he repeatedly checkmates with his razor-sharp reasoning, so the SS chief can rarely do anything but follow his second-in-command's advice.

"Heydrich is undoubtedly far superior to Himmler. He is very much aware of this, and he expresses his

SD to also being head of the secret Gestapo police, in April 1934. And later that year, he completes his apprenticeship during the Night of the Long Knives, when Hitler decides to incapacitate his own SA Stormtroopers.

Hitler is beginning to perceive the brown-clad SA army of street fighting thugs as a handicap and a potential threat in the power game. Heydrich immediately offers himself: from his collection of now several thousand index cards he quickly draws up a list of those SA leaders it would be most advantageous to liquidate.

And while Hitler and Himmler determine the primary goal, Heydrich does not hesitate to sign the execution orders. An unknown number of people, probably several hundred, were killed between 30 June and 2 July, all without trial.

Among those executed are former party organiser, Gregor Strasser, who

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The ideal Nazi family with his wife, Lina, and children Silke, Heider and Klaus.

camp in Dachau, where communists, socialists, intellectuals and critical artists are among its first inmates.

### Apprenticeship

In recognition of his efforts, Heydrich advances from being head of

- 6 -

171

Land	Zahl
A. Altreich	131.800
Ostmark	43.700
Ostgebiete	420.000
Generalgouvernement	2.284.000
Bialystok	400.000
Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren	74.200
Estland - judenfrei -	3.500
Lettland	34.000
Litauen	43.000
Belgien	5.600
Dänemark	165.000
Frankreich / Besetztes Gebiet	700.000
Griechenland	69.600
Niederlande	160.800
Norwegen	1.300
B. Bulgarien	48.000
England	330.000
Finnland	2.300
Irland	4.000
Italien einschl. Sardinien	58.000
Albanien	200
Kroatien	40.000
Portugal	3.000
Rumänien einschl. Bessarabien	542.000
Schweden	8.000
Schweiz	18.000
Serbien	10.000
Slowakei	88.000
Spanien	6.000
Türkei (europ. Teil)	55.000
Ungarn	742.800
UdSSR	5.000.000
Ukraine	2.994.684
Weißrussland aus- schl. Bialystok	446.484
Zusammen: über	11.000.000

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In 1941 Nazi leadership made a plan for the extermination of the Jews. For which Heydrich drew up the foundation including an estimate for the number of European Jews - 11 million in total.

TOPFOTO



# HEYDRICH SUSPECTED OF JEWISH ANCESTRY

**Rumours of Jewish blood in his family threatened Heydrich's career and were a perpetual concern for the otherwise self-assured man.**

Throughout his time in the Nazi party, Reinhard Heydrich had to fight rumours that there were Jews among his ancestors – and that, despite his Aryan appearance, he was, therefore, not of “pure blood”.

The stories about Heydrich's Jewish ancestry were fuelled by a note in a musical lexicon of Heydrich's father, a famous opera singer and Wagner interpreter. In the lexicon, his father was – quite incorrectly – listed with the Jewish-sounding surname, Süss.

Hitler, therefore, ordered the Gestapo leader's background investigated. To Heydrich's relief Germany's leading race expert, Dr Achim Gercke, concluded that Heydrich was “of German origin and

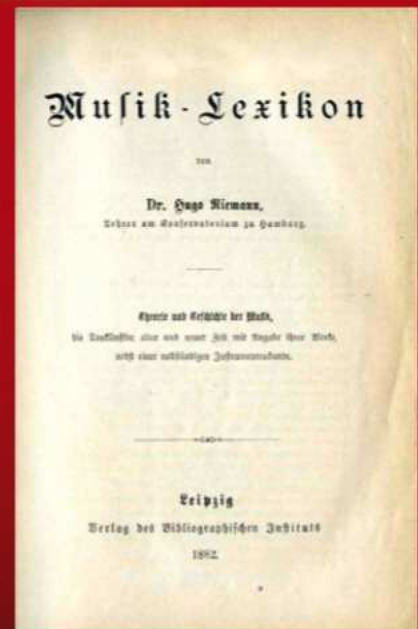
without any Jewish blood”. The suspicion, however, plagued Reinhard Heydrich so much that he hired the renowned genealogist Ernst Hoffmann to dig into his family's past.

For several years, the genealogist came regularly to Heydrich's office to report on his research – and each time, the usually icy Heydrich received him with a thumping heart:

“His doubt was evident in the way he looked at me when I arrived at his office,” said Hoffmann about the meetings.

Nazi leadership exploited the doubts about Heydrich's past to the fullest. Hitler apparently noted to Himmler:

“His non-Aryan descent is of great benefit. He will be us forever thankful to us for keeping him and will blindly obey us.”



**Dr Hugo Riemann's music lexicon from 1892 aroused suspicions of Judaism.**

superiority with his elegant reports. Himmler is simply unable to match him,” notes Himmler's masseur, who often observed the two closely.

Heydrich is persistent in addressing Himmler with the formal “Sie” – fearing that the more personal “du” would make him unable to argue convincingly against his commander.

Occasionally, Himmler seems to have felt almost psychologically attacked by Heydrich's reports. And from pure jealousy would call a subordinate and make him tell Heydrich that Himmler would not authorise the carefully prepared and already adopted proposals – each time using the excuse “by order of the Führer”.

## Heydrich devises the Holocaust

The SS Commander, Himmler, actively avoided any direct confrontation with his immediate subordinate, and Heydrich was even more feared among his own employees. He was icy, his eyes always focused on the goal: paving the way for the Führer's vision of a great Germanic empire. Heydrich was convinced as early as the late 1930s that a natural consequence of a Great Germania would be the removal of the Jews of Europe. Whether they be deported to Madagascar or Siberia, shot

in droves or gassed – all possibilities that Heydrich considered – was less important. The main thing was that the plan was effective. He long pondered over the logistical problems of an extermination, and finally, in January 1942, he proudly presented “the final solution” to the Jew question in a villa in the Wannsee locality of Berlin.

The so-called Wannsee Conference was an historic moment for Nazi Heydrich. He had done his cynical homework to perfection. European Jews had been counted, and the death camps were ready. The railway network was functioning and Zyklon-B gas had proved immensely effective. With a seal of approval from Hitler and Himmler, Heydrich puts the Holocaust into action.

Hitler had also personally selected him to take control of the troubled Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Because of the extensive arms production in Bohemia, it was particularly important for the Führer

to have control over the area and Heydrich's predecessor was on sick leave for not keeping the Czechs on a sufficiently short leash.

## Brutality in Prague

Heydrich approached the task with deliberate hardness. During a speech to his subordinates on his accession he explained how the Czechs could be roughly divided into two groups: one that could be Germanised – made into Germans – and one that could be deported to Siberia, once the Soviet Union has been annexed.

To separate the “good” Czechs from the “bad” Heydrich controlled his protectorate with a well-calculated mix of “carrots and sticks” right from the beginning: he immediately declared a state of emergency and cracked down on the well-established Czech Resistance: 404 were executed, more than 4,000 went through the Gestapo torture chambers, and the ▶

## HEYDRICH GOVERNOR OF BOHEMIA AND MORAVIA

During his time as Reich protector, Heydrich brought about peace in the formerly unruly province. The resistance was crushed, and the population pacified with increased food rations and higher pension payments.



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*Heydrich's injuries and the damage to his Mercedes were limited. But metal fragments caused fatal blood poisoning.*

deportation of Prague's Jews begins. A few hours after Heydrich's arrival, the Czech prime minister was arrested, and within a week, the minister was both tried and sentenced to death for collaboration with the British.

To mitigate the public's mood Heydrich increased food rations, set up soup kitchens for the poor, facilitated access to tobacco and initiated an intensive hunt for black market dealers who are hated by the people. The new governor also received representatives of the workers at Hradcany Castle in Prague, calling them "comrades" and promising to meet their demands.

## Heydrich feared no one

The strategy seemed a long-term one – the people's mood was mitigated, and the resistance decimated within a few months: its leaders were sidelined, and the people too scared to support them.

After his success, Heydrich installed himself and his family at Panenské Brezany castle, north of Prague. Here he started living a comfortable life as the Czechs' German lord while he commuted to Berlin twice weekly to attend to his duties as head of the Reich's security services. Proud, honourable and convinced of his Czech subjects' full respect, Heydrich was always transported around Prague without protection.



*Klaus (R) and Heider (L) Heydrich (R), 8 and 7 years-old, participated in their father's funeral in Berlin. Klaus died in a traffic accident the following year. Heydrich's grave was destroyed in 1945.*

For as he argued: "Why would my Czechs shoot me?"

## Death in Prague

When Heydrich raised his gun, in his official vehicle, on the street corner, in Prague, on May 27, 1942, aiming at the Czech partisan, Jozef Gabčík, the gas chambers of the concentration camps were in full operation, and Hitler's ambition of a pure German Empire was well on its way to becoming a reality.

But Heydrich was not to perform any more services for the Third Reich. Just as he pulled the trigger of his unloaded pistol, Gabčík's partner, Jan Kubis, threw

one of his bombs at the black Mercedes. The bomb fell short, exploding near the car's right rear wheel, but it was enough: Heydrich's back was pierced by metal fragments from the car and horsehair from the seat cushion due to the explosion.

Even though – according to myth – Heydrich pursued his assassins, he collapsed shortly after on a street corner, as a result of his wounds. The head of the Gestapo was taken immediately to the nearby Bulovka hospital, but fell into a coma.

Reinhard Heydrich died seven days later from blood poisoning. ■

### HEYDRICH ARCHITECT BEHIND THE HOLOCAUST

As head of the Jewish Emigration Office, Heydrich planned precisely for the deportation and extermination of Europe's 11 million Jews.

ULLSTEIN BILD

### READ MORE

• Callum McDonald: *The Assassination of Reinhard Heydrich*, Birlinn Ltd, 2007 • Mario Dederichs: *Heydrich – The Face of Evil*, Greenhill Books, 2006 • Charles Whiting: *Heydrich – Henchman of Death*, Pen & Sword Books Ltd, 1998



# CZECHOSLOVAKIAN VILLAGE PAID THE PRICE

**Adolf Hitler saw Heydrich as a shining star, and in a furious frenzy, he ordered a cruel revenge for the assassination. Any city that had links with the killers would feel the wrath of the Nazis.**

**T**he Czech Resistance's assassination of Heydrich infuriated Hitler like never before. So, on June 9, 1942 – just five days after Heydrich's death – he issued an order to the SS leadership in Prague.

The SS were to execute all the men in any village that had housed Heydrich's killers, send the women to concentration camps and any Aryan-looking children to Germany, while those remaining were to be executed – and then the villages were to be razed to the ground.

The German intelligence service determined that the assassins, who had flown in from London, had originally come from the small Czech village of Lidice, outside Prague, the SS moved in on Lidice in a cruel orgy of revenge.

They executed the village's 173 male residents, in groups of five, near a barn, deported the 198 women to the Ravensbrück concentration camp and sent 105 of the city's children to the ghetto in Lodz. On Hitler's orders, children with blond hair and blue eyes were sent for "Germanisation" – which meant they were adopted by SS-approved families in Germany.

Lidice was then burned down, and the ruins of the village razed to the ground. The same fate befell the small quarry village of Lezaky where the attack had been planned. But Hitler's revenge did not stop there.

The Nazis established the death penalty for anyone who agreed with the assassination of Heydrich, and thousands of Czechs came under suspicion of collaborating with the resistance. In all, 13,000 people were arrested, deported to concentration camps or executed.

The horrors and violence of the summer of 1942 became known as "Heydrichiade" to the inhabitants of Czechoslovakia.



**22 km northwest from Prague lay the idyllic village of Lidice with around 500 inhabitants.**



**In only two days, SS soldiers ruined the village. Subsequently engineering troops removed every trace of the village.**



**All the men were shot in revenge for the assassination of Heydrich.**

## The two assassins died in a hail of bullets

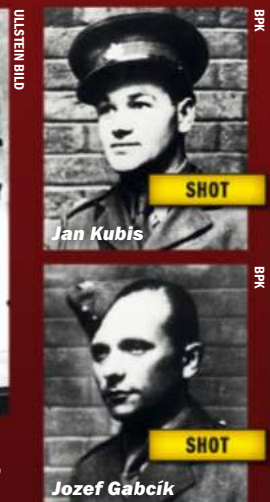
For three weeks the Gestapo chased Jan Kubis and Jozef Gabčík, the two resistance fighters behind the attack.

After a tip from a traitor in the Czechoslovakian resistance movement, an 800-strong Gestapo-force stormed the church, where the two Czechs had taken refuge, early in the morning of June 18, 1942.

Kubis and Gabčík died in the ensuing firefight. Whether they were killed or committed suicide before they fell into Nazi hands, is uncertain.



**In the hunt for the perpetrators the Gestapo exhibited the getaway bike, bomb suitcases and Gabčík's raincoat to the public – and enticed them with a generous bounty.**





Tens of thousands of innocents were raped and murdered when Dirlwanger's blood-thirsty brigade was dispatched to Warsaw in 1944.

# THE HATE BRIGADE

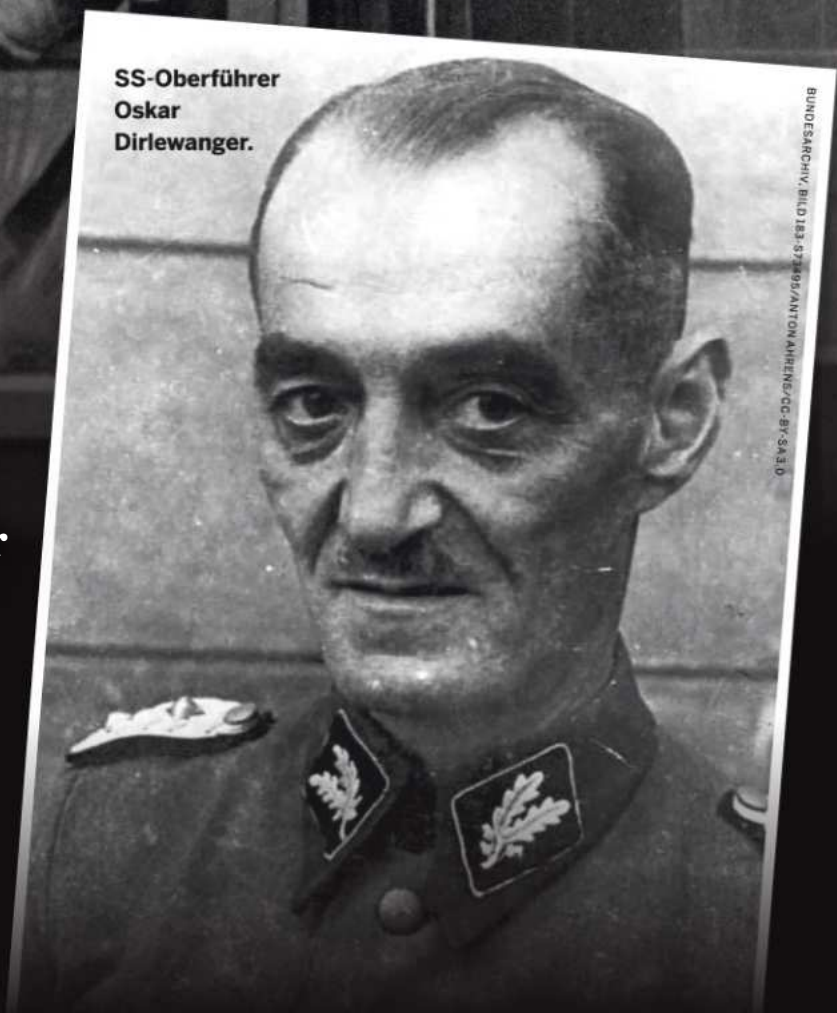




Poachers, murderers and rapists are armed and placed in a special SS unit for hardened criminals. The bloodthirsty brigade – created by Heinrich Himmler and led by a sadistic sex offender – is unleashed in occupied territories across eastern Europe. ▶

Text: **ESBEN SYLVEST**

SS-Oberführer  
Oskar  
Dirlewanger.







## Said about Oskar Dirlewanger...

**"Though intelligent, he was a liar, an alcoholic, and a pervert who molested children"**

Richard C Lukas,  
historian, specialist in  
Poland during World  
War II

**"Violently sadistic"**

Richard Rhodes, American  
journalist, historian and  
Pulitzer Prize winner.

**"A mentally unstable, violent fanatic and alcoholic, who had the habit of erupting into violence under the influence of drugs"**

Police report describing Dirlewanger in WWI

**"An expert in extermination and a devotee of sadism and necrophilia"**

J Bowyer Bell, US historian  
and political adviser

**"A psychopathic killer and child molester"**

Steven Zaloga, US military historian

**E**ven the most battle-hardened German soldiers stopped and stared in amazement. The new SS unit that had just arrived to assist in the battle against a partisan uprising was like nothing the veterans had seen. The men in the so-called *SS-Sturmbrigade Dirlewanger* (Dirlewanger Brigade) seemed agitated, stank of booze and wore no insignias on their uniforms.

The newly arrived SS soldiers didn't hesitate before unleashing a bestial roar and strode forward despite intense fire from enemy snipers. Many died but the brigade did not halt its relentless advance.

The battalion with a seeming death wish slotted in perfectly with its chaotic surroundings. The Warsaw Uprising of 1944 had just erupted, and Polish resistance fighters battled from house to house as they strove to expel the occupying power. The rebellion marked the start of a bloody madness with battles in sewers and fierce knife-to-knife duels in the city's dark cellars.

**ONE OF THE** soldiers in Warsaw was 18-year-old Matthias Schenk – a German national from Belgium. He served in an engineering unit whose orders had been to retake a street in Warsaw's city centre. They'd failed: resistance was fierce and the enemy seemed invincible – until the Dirlewanger Brigade showed up on the streets and launched its brutal assault.

After the brigade's first tank had been struck by the Poles, the SS pulled civilians from their homes

and ordered both women and the old to climb on to the rest of the tanks that followed as human shields. One woman lost her young daughter when the child was pinned under the tank tracks. Immediately a SS soldier shot her in the head to silence her screams. Any civilian who tried to escape was simply shot in the back.

Schenk later recounted how he'd seen a tall and lean man in a black leather jacket standing in the background relentlessly ordering the men forward again and again. He had a thin moustache and a gaunt, scarred face that reminded Schenk of a skull.

In the middle of the gunfire and explosions, Schenk heard the man in the leather jacket order



**"WHY NOT LOOK FOR SUITABLE CANDIDATES AMONG THE VILLAINS?"**

Himmler urges Dirlewanger to find soldiers among criminals.



his men to kill all the Poles – including women and children. Later, Schenk came to understand that the man with the skeletal face was Oskar Dirlewanger, an obscure sadist who led the feared SS brigade. The bloodthirsty group consisted of convicted violent offenders and disorderly soldiers who'd been thrown out of other SS units.

The Dirlewanger Brigade was probably Heinrich Himmler's most insane scheme. When the SS chief came upon the idea in the spring of 1940, he barely imagined the kind of destructive force he'd unleash. The plan was simply to gather convicted poachers, thieves and other minor felons from German prisons in a unit where they could be more useful than sat in their cells.

**AT FIRST, RECRUITS** were carefully selected. Hitler had approved that poachers be reprieved, but inserted a condition that the SS unit only include those convicted of illegal hunting with firearms – not traps and snares. Moreover, they had to be repeat offenders – the unit wasn't to be staffed by half-hearted amateurs, but menfolk with a proven willingness to kill, the Führer stated.

By June 1940, the SS had chosen the brigade's first 84 men. Two months later, a force of 300 recruits gathered in the concentration camp in Sachsenhausen north of Berlin. There they received brief military training and met their new commander for the first time: Oskar Dirlewanger.

Dirlewanger was 44 years old and had – to put it mildly – a chequered past: He had a doctorate in economics and was highly decorated during World War I where he was injured several times in combat. But he was also an alcoholic and a drug addict, and in the 1930s spent two years in prison for raping a ▶

## Five years at the front

The fight against Soviet partisans was brutal and demanded death-defying men who would gladly violate all rules. Dirlewanger's penal battalion was created for fighting on and behind the front.



Dirlewanger was given free rein in the war against Soviet partisans – his methods included terror against civilians and random executions.





Dirlewanger received plaudits for his effective methods of fighting partisans. For example, the chief of police in Lublin sent a commendation to SS headquarters.

## “DIRLEWANGER WAS A NUISANCE AND A TERROR TO THE ENTIRE POPULATION”

Georg Konrad Morgen, who investigated Dirlewanger's crimes in Lublin.

- 13-year-old girl and the attempted rape of several other minors.

Dirlewanger had already joined Hitler's emerging Nazi Party back in 1922, and 10 years later he became one of the so-called “Brownshirts” in the SA, the Nazi stormtroopers. But even the SA, which had a reputation for being thugs, had enough of Dirlewanger's behaviour. After his conviction he

was expelled from the Party in 1934. After serving his sentence, Dirlewanger travelled to Spain and fought in the German Condor Legion, which sided with Franco in the Spanish Civil War. But his ambition was to serve Germany again. In vain he wrote to Heinrich Himmler and begged to join the SS corps.

**IT WAS ONLY** with the creation of the new SS unit that Dirlewanger's prayers were answered – thanks to his old friend Gottlob Berger. Dirlewanger and Berger knew each other from paramilitary right-wing corps that emerged just after World War I. Berger had become a general in the SS and now ►



## Massacre: rebellious farmers murdered by SS soldiers

★ On 29th September, 1944, SS Major Walter Reder led his soldiers into Marzabotto near Bologna. There were rumours the small town gave help to partisans and

now its citizens would face the ultimate punishment.

In the days that followed, Marzabotto's residents were systematically executed. 110

of the victims were under 10 years old. Today, the murders in Marzabotto are believed to have been the worst SS massacre on civilians in Western Europe.

About 770 died



# Massacre in Warsaw

Thousands of innocent civilians were murdered when Dirlewanger's uncontrollable brigade was unleashed on Warsaw's streets. Within two days, around 40,000 Poles had lost their lives.

★ During the Warsaw Uprising in 1944, Oskar Dirlewanger's bloodthirsty brigade advanced at the front of the so-called Wola Massacre – the worst massacre in Polish history.

On 5th August, Dirlewanger's men stormed the Wola district of Warsaw and cold-bloodedly murdered innocent civilians. During one effort, they abused, tortured and shot 5,000 Poles. Within the space of the first two days Dirlewanger's brigade committed 40,000 murders.

The German strategy was to expose the civilian population

to so much terror that the Polish resistance would abandon the fight.

The hope was that the crackdown would help German soldiers avoid being exposed to tough street battles.

But the atrocities had the opposite effect. Polish partisans fought fiercely, and the insurgency continued for 63 days before the Poles were finally forced to give up.

Nobody knows exactly how many people died, but historians estimate that the figure was around 200,000.

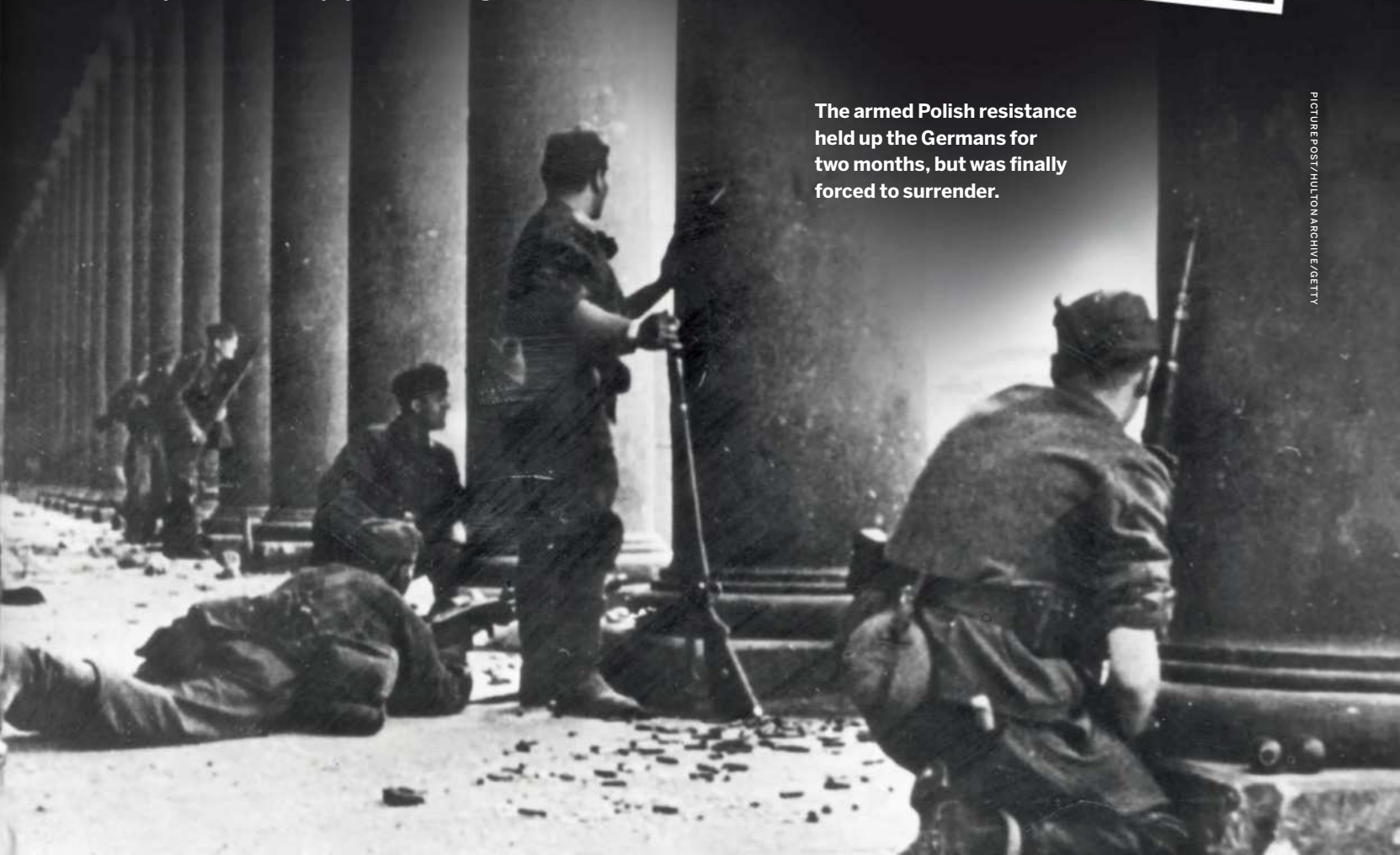


SZ PHOTO/IBL



The armed Polish resistance held up the Germans for two months, but was finally forced to surrender.

PICTURE POST/HULTONARCHIVE/GETTY





- installed his comrade as commander of the new criminal battalion.

**AFTER TRAINING IN** Sachsenhausen, the brigade was deployed to Poland. First stop was the border with Russia, where the soldiers built fortifications guarding a Jewish labour camp, next to the cities of Krakow and Lublin. It was in the Jewish ghetto in Lublin that Dirlewanger and his poachers first gained notoriety for killing, extorting and robbing innocent civilians. Dirlewanger would arrest Jews at random, alleging they had committed ritual murder. Unless they paid a large sum immediately, they would be shot on the spot.

“Dirlewanger was a nuisance and a terror to the entire population. He repeatedly pillaged the ghetto in Lublin, extorting ransoms”, stated lawyer Georg Konrad Morgen who the SS had sent to the General

Government part of occupied Poland to investigate a large number of charges against Dirlewanger.

The list of crimes turned out to be even more extensive than the lawyer could have imagined. For example, Morgen discovered that Dirlewanger was carrying out “scientific experiments” on young Jewish women who had been forced to undress before being injected with strychnine.

“Dirlewanger looked on, smoking a cigarette, as did his friends, and they saw how these girls were dying. Immediately after that the corpses were cut into small pieces, mixed with horse meat and boiled into soap”, Morgen said after the war.

Although Morgen reported Dirlewanger, his superiors responded by reducing Morgen’s rank and dispatching him to the Eastern Front.

Nevertheless, Dirlewanger’s behaviour once again proved too much even for the local SS. The

**Bronislav Kaminski (right) began as a soldier in the Red Army, but later switched sides.**

BUNDESARCHIV, BILD 101-280-1075-16A/WEHMEYER/CC-BY-SA 3.0

## SS leaders shocked by Kaminski’s murderers

**Soldiers in the Kaminski Brigade robbed, raped and murdered Polish civilians at will during the war in Warsaw.**

★ Dirlewanger’s men were not the only SS soldiers who became known for their brutality during the hard fighting on the Eastern Front. The so-called Kaminski Brigade comprising Soviet defectors was equally feared. The unit was led by the brutal Bronislav Kaminski – a former Red Army soldier who had become an enemy of the communists in the 1930s and was sent to a prison camp in Siberia.

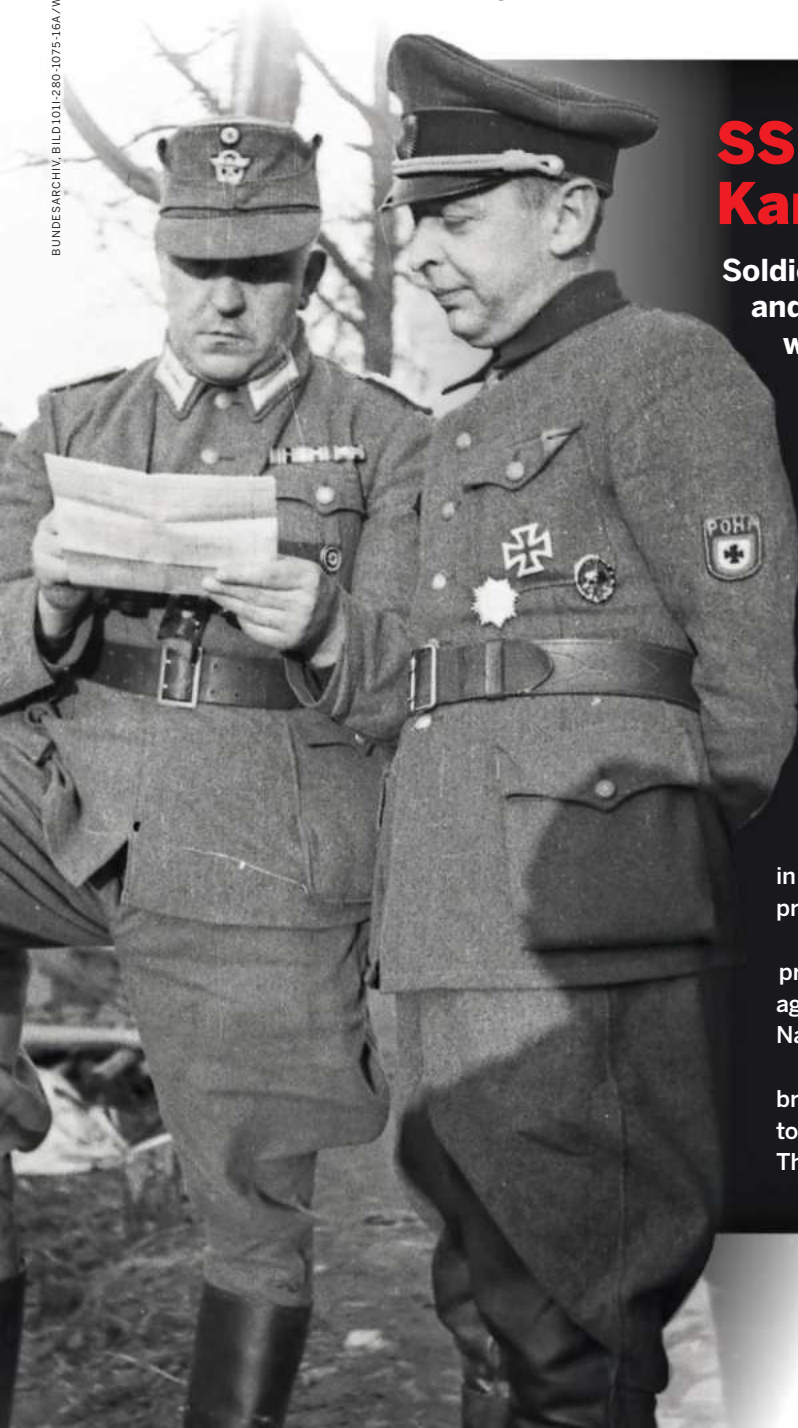
The Kaminski Brigade was primarily known for its efforts against Soviet partisan and Nazi resistance groups.

In 1944, the aggressive brigade was sent to Warsaw to help crush the uprising. There the brigade robbed,

raped and murdered civilians to such an extent that the SS leadership finally decided to pull the brigade away from the fighting. After years of cruelty on the Eastern Front, the soldiers had been transformed into a gang of drunken criminals that could no longer be controlled.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, SS leaders believed the looting was the biggest problem. When Kaminski and his soldiers kept back valuables for themselves, it was considered stealing from the Third Reich – a serious crime over and above any atrocities.

The SS chose a radical solution to the problem: the brigade was dissolved while Kaminski was taken out of Warsaw in great secrecy and then executed.





local Higher SS and Police Leader Friedrich-Wilhelm Krüger called SS General Berger at his headquarters in Berlin and passed on an ultimatum:

“[Unless] this bunch of criminals disappears from the General Government within a week, I will go myself and lock them up.”

If the intention was to stop Dirlewanger, then Krüger had called the wrong man. Berger did nothing to curb his old comrade's excesses – instead, the general simply sent the commander further east to the extensive Belarusian forests to hunt Russian partisans. Here Dirlewanger would be beyond the reach of SS investigators. On these new hunting grounds, Dirlewanger and his soldiers were free to give their ugly dispositions carte blanche and kill at will. They were like a flock of wolves in a sheep pen.

**FOR TWO YEARS** SS-Sturmbrigade Dirlewanger rampaged behind the front in occupied Belarus. Part of the brigade's remit was to take out partisans who destroyed German supply lines. And the commander had his own, unorthodox method for snatching them.

He would fly over villages that he suspected were sheltering resistance fighters in a reconnaissance plane. If the plane was fired at, he'd return with his soldiers and burn the village to the ground. No prisoners were taken during the occupation – men, women and children alike were all killed.

Other times, Dirlewanger collected together women and children left behind by the partisans and forced them to pass through minefields that protected the Belarusian positions. The SS chief made no distinction between civilians and resistance fighters, and wherever his men turned up, murder, rape and pillage were all on the agenda.

In Germany the Nazi leadership did nothing to stop or slow the barbarism, which according to some historians cost at least 120,000 Belarusians their lives. On the contrary, Adolf Hitler issued a decree in January 1943 stating that German soldiers could not be prosecuted for acts committed during anti-partisan operations. Dirlewanger had officially been given free rein.

During one operation, Dirlewanger's men surrounded a small town and ordered all 2,500

## **“DR DIRLEWANGER WAS HARDLY A GOOD BOY... BUT HE WAS A GOOD SOLDIER”**

SS General Gottlob Berger, who supported Dirlewanger on several occasions.

inhabitants – men, women and children – into large barns. Then Dirlewanger came forward to personally issue the death sentence: “Shoot immediately!” The door of the first barn was opened and the soldiers emptied their machine gun magazines into the crowds. They then moved swiftly to the next barn and repeated the action. Finally, the soldiers closed the barn doors and set them alight.

Any who managed to exit the barns – several with burning clothes – were shot immediately.

Even in the lawless guerrilla war, Dirlewanger's actions sparked disgust – despite having Hitler's personal blessing.

Such was the case when – for example – in March 1943 the Dirlewanger Brigade participated in action against partisans alongside other SS troops. Officially, the offensive took the lives of around 9,800 partisans, with 6,000 apprehended.

Once again, Dirlewanger's men led the way in brutality. When a German propaganda officer travelled around the area after the fighting, he reported that some partisans had been burned alive while others had been eaten by wild boar.

Wilhelm Kube, who was Commissioner General of Belarus, protested, but again guardian angel Berger intervened. The general dismissed the criticism as nonsense and stated that Dirlewanger was actually quite decent – considering the circumstances.

**IN JUNE 1943** Dirlewanger had 760 men under him, but the battalion constantly required fresh blood. Casualties were far higher than in other SS units – it wasn't without reason that the brigade was nicknamed the “Ascension Commandos”.

The number of suitable poachers gradually dwindled, forcing the recruitment base to be ►



**Emblem of the 36th Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS, which became the SS-Sturmbrigade Dirlewanger.**



## **Massacre: Germans burned the French to death**

★ On the morning of 10th June, 1944 the SS received information that one of its officers was being held captive by partisans in a local village. A few hours later,

a German battalion surrounded Oradour-sur-Glane and gathered all the inhabitants. The men were forced into six barns where they were shot. Then the barns were

burned down. Women and children were chased into the church. The Germans threw a fire bomb into the church and shot dead any who tried to escape.

**About 642 died**



► expanded. Dirlewanger started receiving court-martialled SS troops, Russian deserters and a variety of convicted criminals from prisons to swell his brigade's depleted ranks.

In February 1944, Heinrich Himmler granted Dirlewanger permission to hand-pick up to 800 men from the "anti-socials and the career criminals" who'd been interned in German concentration camps. The battalion's new recruits now included murderers, rapists, child abusers and the mentally ill among their number.

**IT WAS WITH** a certain amount of pride that Himmler mentioned Dirlewanger and his soldiers in a speech to local Nazis in Poland in 1944:

"I said to Dirlewanger, 'Now, why not look for suitable candidates among the villains, the real criminals, in the concentration camps?'"

Himmler placed particular emphasis on the battalion's discipline:

"The atmosphere in the regiment is often somewhat medieval in the use of corporal punishment... If someone pulls a face when asked whether we will win the war or not, he will slump down... dead, because the others will have shot him out of hand."

No form of disobedience was tolerated. Rule breakers were usually punished by being beaten with clubs or at worst shot.

One particularly feared punishment was the so-called Dirlewanger coffin. Here, the victim was forced to stand upright in a cramped, closed box for days. According to the soldiers, the victim came out either a dead man or a merciless killer.

The harsh penalties were designed to force the soldiers to obey blindly and show courage and fearlessness at all times. In December 1943, Dirlewanger even issued an order that cowardice in battle would be punished by death.

During the uprising in Warsaw in 1944, 18-year-old Mathias Schenk experienced the battalion's alcohol-infused bravado up close when it was brought in to support his unit.

Shortly before, the men had been withdrawn from Belarus once the Red Army had recaptured it and were instead deployed to Warsaw. The soldiers' attitude remained the same despite the fact the

unit had been redesignated SS-Sonderregiment Dirlewanger: concentrated ferocity and blood lust.

During the first week of the Warsaw Uprising, Germans killed between 40,000 and 50,000 Poles – most of them in the Wola district where Dirlewanger's men roamed. With no regard for their victims' age or gender, the men murdered and raped their way through Warsaw's old town where – according to eyewitness reports – the unit set fire to prisoners, impaled infants on bayonets and hung women from balconies.

After a few days of fighting, Schenk came under the Dirlewanger's command. Here, with his fellow soldiers, he learned to drink vodka on an empty stomach every morning, so he was suitably anaesthetised before the fighting began.

**OUT IN THE** field, Schenk was placed in the front line where he had to blast doors and remove obstacles so Dirlewanger's men could move in. One day the soldiers forced their way into a room where wounded Poles and Germans lay side by side, cared for by a single doctor and 15 nurses.

The wounded Germans begged the SS soldiers to spare the Poles, but their pleas fell on deaf ears, and the Poles had their heads smashed in with rifle butts. The battalion then tore the clothes off the nurses. That same evening, Schenk watched the naked and battered nurses with hands over their heads and blood running down their legs being led to the gallows, which was set up in an open space. Dirlewanger himself laughed before kicking the bricks away from under one of the nurses.

After two months, the uprising in Warsaw had been crushed. 200,000 Poles had died while SS-Sturmbrigade Dirlewanger had lost 2,700 men – the majority were new recruits from an SS penal camp that had been brought in during the uprising. Schenk had seen enough. In the winter of 1944-45 he deserted and Polish peasants helped him to hide in a horse stable until the war was over. "Why did they save me? I have never learned why. Out of mercy, probably. I looked like a beaten kid", he recounted many years later.

After Warsaw, Dirlewanger's troops were sent to Slovakia to crush another uprising, and in the spring of 1945 returned to Germany before taking part in



Dirlewanger (left) in conversation with some officers.



## Massacre: civilians were victims of Hitler's revenge

★ In 1942, Gestapo chief Reinhard Heydrich was assassinated by Czech resistance fighters in Prague. Hitler's reprisal was based on a false rumour that claimed the

perpetrators originated from the village of Lidice. A few days later Lidice burnt down, all its men shot, the women sent to the Ravensbrück concentration camp and most

children gassed in mobile gas units. In the weeks that followed, another town was destroyed and many Czechs were randomly selected and murdered in revenge.

About 1,300 died





the final, decisive battles against the advancing Red Army. Dirlewanger escaped retribution at the hands of the Russians, but his days were numbered. In early June 1945 he was captured in southern Germany. His route here isn't known. Dirlewanger was taken custody by French forces, but his guards were Poles.

How much the prison guards knew about Oskar Dirlewanger's crimes is uncertain, but according to a fellow inmate, the Poles beat the German so thoroughly that by the morning of 5th June, 1945 he was unable to speak or move. Officially, Dirlewanger was pronounced dead two days later.

His guardian angel, Gottlob Berger, could no longer protect him. During the Nuremberg trials, Berger was confronted with his old friend's atrocities: "Dr Dirlewanger was hardly a good boy... But he was a good soldier", said Berger. Berger was sentenced to 25 years in prison for crimes against humanity, but was pardoned in 1951.

Schenk returned to Belgium, where he started a family and had four children. He organised emergency aid to Poland and met with veterans from the uprising in Warsaw. ★

**Esben Sylvest** is a military historian.

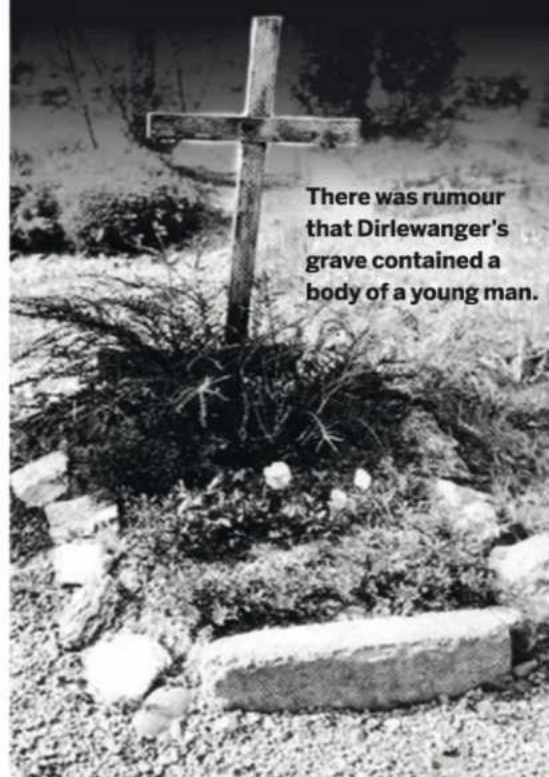
**Further reading:**  
**The Cruel Hunters** (1998) by French MacLean  
 ★ **The SS Dirlewanger Brigade** (2011) by Christian Ingrao.

## Dirlewanger's body was dug up

★ After World War II, rumours persisted that Oskar Dirlewanger had survived the war – despite eyewitness accounts claiming the opposite. It was alleged that he and several other leading Nazis had escaped to Egypt, and there was a rumour that a completely different corpse was in Dirlewanger's grave in Altshausen.

In 1960, German authorities decided to open Dirlewanger's grave to see what was actually there. Günther Weyrich, a professor at the forensic institute at the University of Freiburg, identified the body in the coffin as Oskar Dirlewanger from its length and the war wounds found on it.

But the professor's examination did not dampen the rumours. On the contrary, Israeli historian Michael Bar-Zohar claimed that the body of the grave belonged to a young man with gunshot wounds and that Dirlewanger had entered the Foreign Legion after the war. US writer Glenn B Infield has also claimed that Dirlewanger had moved to Egypt and that he worked for the Egyptian army. However, it has not been possible to confirm these claims.



There was rumour that Dirlewanger's grave contained a body of a young man.

FRENCH MACLEAN



During an action in 1944, several members of the French resistance movement were arrested by Vichy regime militia.

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# THE BUTCHER OF LYONS

Red-hot needles, whips and boiling water – the butcher Klaus Barbie's sadistic methods knew no limits. Over two years he tortured thousands of Jews and opponents in the French city of Lyon. When the Allies freed the city, Barbie fled and found a new employer.

Text: **KASPER SCHLIE**





**“AT THE GESTAPO’S  
HEADQUARTERS ON  
THE THIRD FLOOR OF  
HOTEL TERMINUS, THE  
MESSAGE WAS CLEAR:  
I CAME TO KILL”**

GABRIEL HACKETT/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY

After World War II, Barbie worked for the British and US intelligence services before going underground in Bolivia in 1955. Here he is wearing German uniform in 1944.





German officers in occupied Lyon in 1942. In the background, you can see Gestapo chief Klaus Barbie.

**J**ust a single lamp cast a pale light over Suite 68 of Hotel Terminus at Lyon train station. Jewish scientist Marcel Gompel sat on a wooden chair in the middle of the floor.

Gompel had ended up in the clutches of Klaus Barbie, infamous local Gestapo chief. The 29-year-old Nazi had beaten Gompel with clubs and pushed his head under water until his lungs were bursting. But Gompel had not given the German anything but his steely gaze, so Barbie played his trump card.

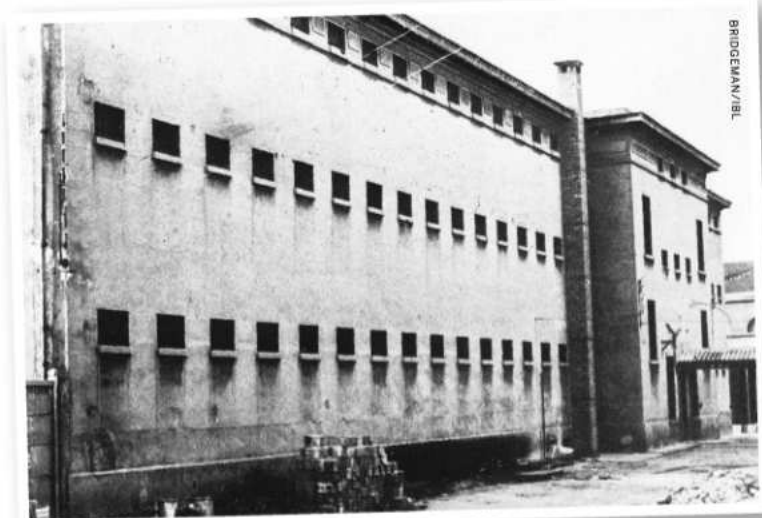
An assistant attached chains to the prisoner's ankles and using a pulley fixed to the ceiling

he hoisted Gompel so the victim was hanging upside down. The assistant picked up a knife and systematically cut the scientist's skin for several hours. His screams did not reach the street outside.

But Barbie was not happy. A bathtub was filled with a sharp-smelling chemical concoction, and on the order of the Gestapo chief, Gompel was lowered into the tub. He moaned and writhed, and when he passed out, Barbie revived the victim by pouring boiling water on his mutilated body so the interrogation could continue. For three days after the interrogation, Gompel wandered among his terrified fellow inmates. The pain was so intense that he could neither sit or lie down. When he eventually died, the other prisoners held hands and sang the *Marseillaise*.

Simply the word Gestapo, the name of the Nazi secret police, brought every Jew or resistance fighter in the occupied territories out in a cold sweat. The police flouted the rules of the Geneva Convention and continued to use increasingly tortuous methods. In Lyon, a man emerged who was so much more than anything Gestapo chief Henrich Himmler could have hoped for. Klaus Barbie was the most brutal Gestapo executioner of all.

**WHEN BARBIE WAS BORN** in 1913, there was nothing that suggested he would be anything but a regular, lawful citizen. His parents Anna and Nikolaus Barbie were Catholics and well-liked teachers in the small town of Udler, south of Bonn. Barbie was perceived by most as a pleasant and



Montluc prison where Klaus Barbie incarcerated thousands of resistance members and Jews.



smart boy who chatted happily with the people he met.

**WORLD WAR I** broke the family idyll. His father came back after a prolonged captivity in France – a country he began to hate fervently. He was traumatised after the fighting, and had shrapnel in his neck. He tried to bury the terrible memories with alcohol and began to abuse his wife and both sons. Therefore, Barbie found it as a great relief when he was sent to boarding school in Trier in 1923. His diligence and intelligence meant he planned to study theology at university.

But then came the fatal year of 1933. First, the Nazis took power in Germany, and in June Barbie's younger brother died from illness. When his alcoholic father died, Barbie went into a deep

**“IN 1913 THERE WAS NO SIGN THAT HE WOULD BE ANYTHING BUT A REGULAR, LAWFUL CITIZEN”**

depression. On top of everything else, he'd have to forget his expensive plans for further study. Barbie had been born illegitimately, and in a very conservative Germany he did not inherit a single mark. His future looked particularly bleak.

**THE YOUNG** and intelligent Barbie soon found his way into another career. After two years as a fanatic member of *HitlerJugend* – the Hitler Youth – he was admitted to the SS intelligence service SD in ▶



**Emblem for Sicherheitsdienst – the SS's internal intelligence service.**

## Gestapo existed in all occupied countries

**The Gestapo torturers terrorised civilian populations throughout Europe. Local officials developed their own methods.**

★ The Gestapo was an extended arm of the German Nazi party, governed by the iron fist of Heinrich Himmler. It monitored and fought all those who were thought to pose a threat to the state.

The organisation's 32,000 men worked with terrifying precision and during the war years it developed a number of methods to unravel the enemy's network. "Very simple diet; hard bunk; dark cell; deprivation of sleep; exhaustive drilling; also flogging" was how the official Gestapo directive described the methods used in a secret document dated 12th June, 1942.

In reality, the secret police used a significant number of more brutal methods to extract information from their enemies in Germany and in the occupied territories. Water torture and abuse were used everywhere where the Gestapo operated, but some prosecutors also developed their own techniques.

### **Norway: deadly bath of iced water.**

Gestapo man Richard Bruns forced information from the resistance by laying them in an ice bath until they almost froze to death. Bruns was executed in Oslo in 1947.

### **Denmark: whipped with wires.**

In Copenhagen's Gestapo headquarters, torturer Ib Birkedal bent his suspects over a table and whipped them with wires until they began to talk.

### **Poland: prisoners beat each other.**

The Gestapo ran a large prison in Poland, but did not perform the torture themselves. Instead, non-Jews were forced to abuse their Jewish fellow prisoners as the Gestapo watched.

### **Belgium: electrodes in open wounds.**

Gestapo agent Max Gunter first cut his prisoners. Then he placed electrodes in the open wounds and turned on the power.

### **Netherlands: torturer**

Andries Pieters invented his own methods of torture. He made his opponents talk by tying string tightly around their genitals.

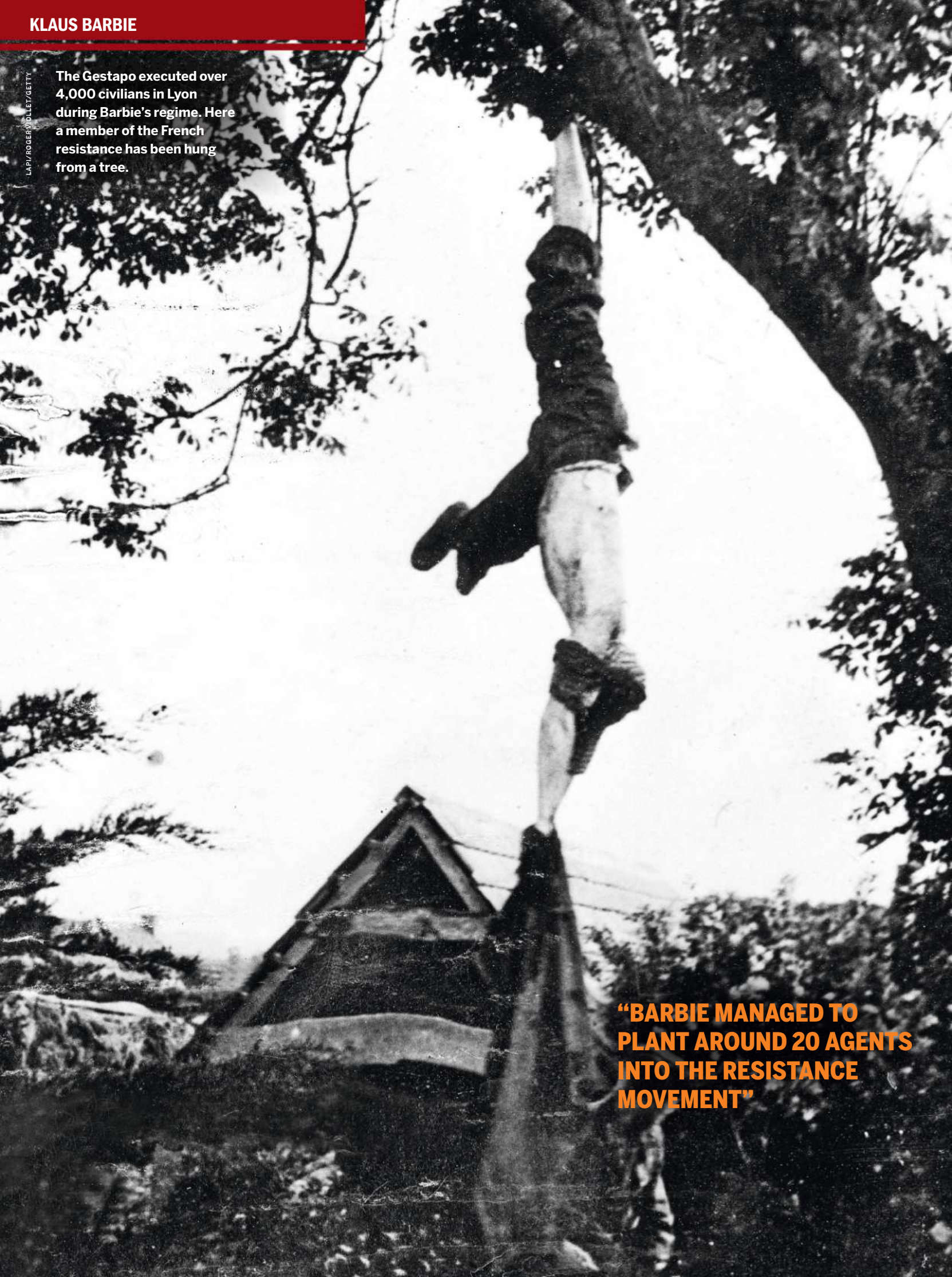
**Klaus Barbie always brought his infamous baton.**





The Gestapo executed over 4,000 civilians in Lyon during Barbie's regime. Here a member of the French resistance has been hung from a tree.

**"BARBIE MANAGED TO  
PLANT AROUND 20 AGENTS  
INTO THE RESISTANCE  
MOVEMENT"**





► September 1935. It appears it was here he found his true calling, finding both clarity and clearly defined foes. Over the next few years, Barbie received intense training in policing and in interrogation techniques to break any “enemy of the state”.

**FROM 1940** things moved at a furious pace. In April, Barbie was promoted to SS-Untersturmführer. Five days later he married, and then in May he was posted to occupied Amsterdam. He threw himself into his work with great energy, constantly gathering intelligence. He confined arrested Jews in a newly created ghetto and sent thousands of people by train to the concentration camps in Buchenwald and Mauthausen.

Gestapo high command took notice. Barbie was promoted to captain and in November 1942 he was sent to Lyon in France as chief of the local Gestapo.

For the Nazis, Lyon was a ticking time bomb. Jews, communists and opponents had built widespread networks throughout the city from the beginning of the war. When Barbie spoke to his subordinates for the first time at the Gestapo’s headquarters on the third floor of Hotel Terminus, the message was

quite clear: “*Ich bin gekommen om zu töten*” – I came to kill.

Barbie took advantage of his experiences in Amsterdam, and soon filled Montluc prison with Jews. But the resistance movement led by Jean Moulin proved harder to break. Those involved were fearless and so good at melting into the local population that La Concorde café was a meeting place for both the Gestapo and the resistance movement. Often the enemies sat just a few metres apart drinking espresso.

Barbie managed to plant around 20 agents into the resistance movement, and eventually information began to filter back to Gestapo headquarters. A notice board in the basement of Hotel Terminus was filled with pictures and information that revealed the links between the suspects.

**THE BIG BREAKTHROUGH** came in 1943. A well-placed French traitor tipped Barbie about a secret meeting that would take place in a villa in Lyon. All the resistance movement leaders were there. That same evening, Moulin was barely able to start the meeting before the door was kicked ►



RUE DES ARCHIVES/AGF/BL

**A traitor revealed resistance fighter Jean Moulin in 1943. Despite sadistic torture, the Frenchman did not say a single word.**

## Torture would make the prisoner talk

**Red-hot needles, handcuffs with spikes, and oxygen. Klaus Barbie was prepared to use all possible methods to force prisoners to talk.**

★ **Handcuff with spikes:** the prisoner was handcuffed. When they were raised to the roof by chains, spikes on the inside drilled their flesh.

★ **Just fists:** Barbie used to abuse his prisoners himself. A witness has told that he hit directly into open wounds and fractures.

★ **Baton:** Barbie always had a small black baton padded with lead with him when he interrogated a prisoner.

★ **Bottle:** beer bottles were pushed deep into the prisoner’s mouth until their lips split.

★ **Morning star:** prisoners were ordered to lie on their stomach. Then Barbie struck them with a spiked ball. A female victim lost the ability to walk after the torture.

★ **Cannula:** one prisoner had oxygen injected into their bladder.

★ **Red-hot needles:** Jean Moulin, the French resistance fighter, had red-hot needles pushed under his nails.

★ **Electrodes:** captives were given electric shocks of varying intensity and duration.

★ **Tooth pliers:** if the prisoner denied the charge or refused to answer, Barbie often responded by pulling out one of the victim’s teeth.

★ **Tendon removal:** a prisoner told of how Barbie drilled a hole in his hand, jabbed a finger into the wound and pulled out the tendons.

★ **Skin flaying:** a prisoner

testified to this medieval torture method. Skin was torn off in long strips and then the prisoner was lowered into a chemical cocktail.

★ **Bathtub with boiling water:** quick dips in the water gave prisoners second-degree burns.

★ **Bath with ice water:** used to wake up unconscious prisoners so that their torture could continue.





## Executioner thrived in Lyon

The Gestapo established its headquarters in a hotel. While the policemen drank at the bar, the prisoners were waiting in the torture cellar.

### Gestapo prison:

Lyon's largest prison, where thousands of Jews and resistance members were imprisoned and interrogated before being deported to concentration camps.



HEMIS/ALAMY/IBL

87 km from Lyon

### Children's hideaway:

the Jewish orphanage in Izieu, where Barbie found 44 children who he sent to Auschwitz. All were killed just after their arrival.



### Gestapo Headquarters Hotel Terminus:

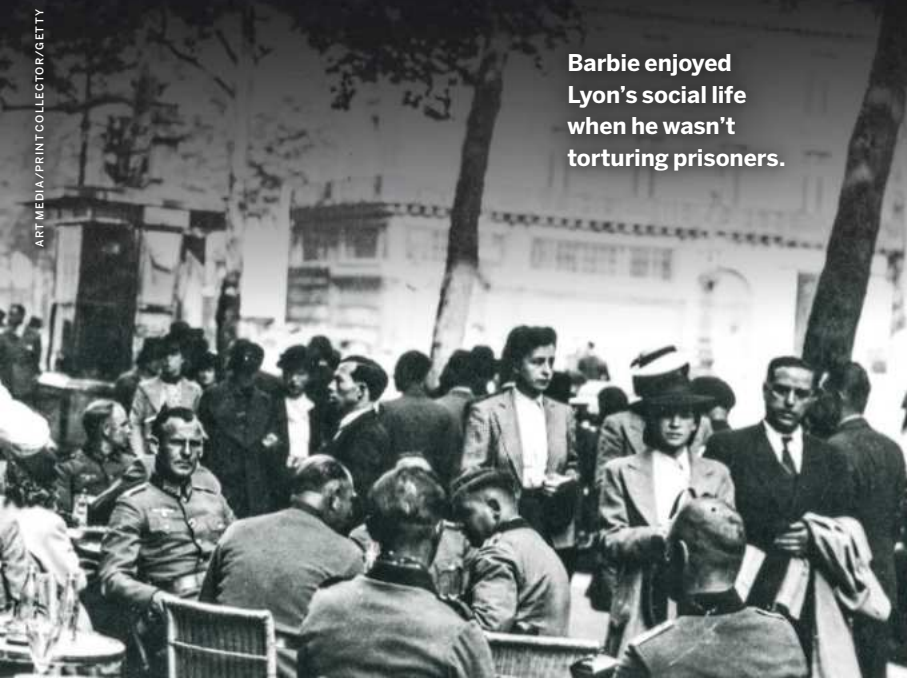
the pleasant hotel near the train station was the Gestapo's headquarters. German officers enjoyed drinks at the bar while the prisoners shouted in vain from the torture chambers.



IBL

Barbie's last stop, the airport in Lyon, where he ordered the assassination of the last 109 prisoners before he fled to Germany.

Barbie enjoyed Lyon's social life when he wasn't torturing prisoners.



► in and the room was filled with manic German commandos as brawls broke out.

Barbie had caught the French in their own backyard. In a matter of minutes, all were handcuffed and removed. When the Gestapo's black cars drove in through the gate at Montluc prison, everyone knew what would happen: all the French had heard rumours about the torture.

Barbie started by attempting to charm his prisoners into talking. He offered Moulin a drink and a cigar in the elegant bar at Hotel Terminus. A pianist played Chopin, and portraits of Hitler, Göring and Goebbels stared down from the walls. But Moulin refused to talk. He stared down at the table and did not say a single word.

Barbie became furious at this slight and he took the Frenchman into suite 68. His assistant Dr Bartelmus had prepared the tools for Barbie's torture: knuckledusters, whips, handcuffs with pins, needles, a lit candle and Barbie's black baton.

Dr Bartelmus held Moulin's hand between the door and the door frame while Barbie repeatedly hit the door. The Frenchman's fingers were broken one by one. The screams could not be heard from the soundproofed room. Needles were warmed up to glowing before being pushed under Moulin's nails. He was assaulted with knuckledusters and clubs as blood spewed from a number of wounds.

"I want names!" Barbie asked time after time, but Moulin remained silent.

**WHEN THE FRENCHMAN** passed out from pain, Barbie pushed his head into a bath of icy water so Moulin almost drowned. Roughly he was pulled up from the water, and Barbie repeated his questions. Then Moulin was pressed under the water again.

Moulin was cuffed with screw-levered handcuffs around his wrists. The cuffs were tightened so spikes on the inside broke through to the bone and blood flowed. His legs were also crushed.

The torture lasted for several days. Moulin's nails were pulled out, needles were stabbed into his body, he was branded and beaten again and again. Every evening he was driven back to Montluc prison where the prisoners tried to fix his injuries. One of the prisoners, Christian Pineau, remembers the long night of horror:

"He had lost consciousness, his eyes were hollowed as if they were buried in his head. He had an ugly bluish wound on his temple. A low moan escaped from his swollen lips". At the same time, Barbie threw himself into Lyon's nightlife, where liquor flowed freely and scantily clad women crowded around the powerful officers. Several of them – including Barbie – were treated for sexually transmitted diseases. Barbie loved playing the piano and singing old German songs during these wild





Personal effects and pictures that belonged to executed civilians in a German extermination camp.

parties, and his fingers danced elegantly over the keys. Obviously, the audience had no idea that a few hours earlier the same fingers had been smeared in blood from their countrymen.

**AT THE BEGINNING OF JULY,** Moulin was taken to Hotel Terminus for the last time. Barbie asked the same questions again – but Moulin neither could nor would say a single word.

Barbie lost his patience. In pure frustration he struck and kicked the Frenchman with renewed strength until Moulin fainted and fell into a deep coma. The Frenchman's arms, legs and several ribs were broken. Barbie realised that he had lost the battle of wits against Moulin. He dragged the lifeless body into an adjoining room and gathered the other resistance members. The sight of his body would make them talk. They saw Moulin lying lifeless on a sofa. His skin was almost yellow, his breath was heavy and his head wrapped in bandages.

Soon afterwards, Moulin was sent by military train to Frankfurt in Germany, where interrogations would continue. But the train had travelled no

**“WE WERE OVERWHELMED BY THE UNMISTAKABLE ODOUR OF WARM BLOOD”**

further than Metz before the resistance leader Jean Moulin died following an 18-day-long martyrdom.

**BARBIE HAD NOT** managed to get Moulin to say anything useful, but Hitler was still impressed.

Barbie was awarded Iron Cross 1st Class. The leader of the Free French Forces, General Charles de Gaulle responded from his exile in London by awarding Moulin a posthumous Order of Liberation.

Barbie's focus gradually shifted from ordinary interrogations to sadistic torture sessions and outright mass murder of prisoners.

When Adrien Richard, deputy police chief of Lyon, visited Gestapo headquarters, he barely believed his own eyes.

“We went down into the cellar,” he recounted later. “When we got to the corridor, we were ►





Incarcerated children behind the barbed wire fence in Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1945.

## Nazis killed 1.5 million children

**Klaus Barbie was not the only one who murdered children during World War II.**

★ Barbie was by no means the only one who directed his hatred towards children – and his deportation of Jewish children from Izieu's orphanage was not unique in occupied territories. The Nazis regarded Jewish children as "unproductive" and as representatives of the future of Judaism – a new generation that could avenge the murdered. Therefore, thousands of Jewish children were sent by train to concentration camps, where most were killed in the gas chambers after they arrived.

Many newborns were thrown directly into the crematorium ovens, and several thousand children died because they were exposed to the bestial medical experiments of, among others, ruthless concentration camp doctor Josef Mengele.

After the war, Mengele fled to South America, and he was never held accountable for his war crimes.



### The victims from the orphanage



• Sami Adelsheimer, 5 years	• My Halaunbrenner, age unknown
• Hans Ament, 10 years	• Claudine Halaunbrenner 5 years
• Nina Aronowicz, 12 years	• Georges Halpern, 8 years
• Max- Marcel Balsam, 12 years	• Arnold Hirsch, 17 years
• Jean-Paul Balsam, 10 years	• Isidore Kargeman, 10 years
• Esther Benassayag, 12 years	• Renate Krochmal, 8 years
• Elie Benassayag, 10 years	• Liane Krochmal, 6 years
• Jacob Benassayag, 8 years	• Max Leiner, 8 years
• Jacques Benguigui, 12 years	• Claude Levan-Reifman, 10 years
• Richard Benguigui, 7 years	• Fritz Loebmann, 15 years
• Jean-Claude Benguigui, 5 years	• Alice-Jacqueline Luzgart, 10 years
• Barouk-Raoul Bentitou, 12 year	• Paula Mermelstein, 10 years
• Majer Bulka, age unknown	• Marcel Mermelstein, 7 years
• Albert Bulka, 4 years	• Theodor Reis, 16 years
• Lucienne Friedler, 5 years	• Gilles Sadowski, 8 years
• Egon Gamiel, 9 years	• Martha Spiegel, 10 years
• Maurice Gerenstein, 13 years	• Senta Spiegel, 9 years
• Liliane Gerenstein, 11 years	• Sigmund Springer, 8 years
• Henri-Chaïm Goldberg, 13 years	• Sarah Szuklaper, age unknown
• Joseph Goldberg, 12 years	• Max Tetelbaum, 12 years
	• Herman Tetelbaum, 10 years
	• Charles Weltner, 9 years
	• Otto Wertheimer, age unknown
	• Emile Zuckerberg, 5 years

The youngest child was four years old, the oldest 17 when Klaus Barbie sent the 44 children from Izieu to their death.



► overwhelmed by the unmistakable odour of warm blood. We went further and came to a puddle of congealed blood in front of a cell door. After the door was opened we witnessed an appalling scene: corpses were piled up in a corner of the cell and literally swimming in a sea of blood. They were all young men who had been killed by machine guns as they faced the door. Some were bound together, and I remember that the postman, still in his uniform, had pulled himself up on a chair before being killed."

**IN MARCH 1944**, 43-year-old Lise Lesevre was arrested by the Gestapo. She was an important courier for the resistance movement and brought a letter for a key resistance member "Didier".

In the basement of Montluc prison she was hung up naked by the screw-levered handcuffs. Then an unbearable ritual of torture and assault began: interrogation, rape, maltreatment, multiple interrogation then another rape, abuse, the same interrogation over and over again.

"Who is Didier? Where is Didier" Barbie would ask constantly, staring icily at Lesevre.

"He was terrifying to see, because he had small eyes, like marbles, that moved constantly," she recalled. Many years later she added: "You had a feeling that a ferocious beast was coming into the cell. It was absolute terror."

Even when Barbie wasn't in her cell, he plagued his prisoners by slapping a rider's crop against his boots as he prowled the basement. In one session, Barbie ordered an assistant to beat Lesevre with a spiked ball hung from a cosh. A vertebra was broken and when she fainted, Barbie called a doctor to revive her. As she awoke, he stood over her with piano music playing in the background. Barbie stroked her hands:

"What you've done is magnificent, my dear," he said. "Nobody has held out as long as you. It's nearly over. I'm very upset, but let's finish... Who is 'Didier'?" Silence.

Barbie played his trump card and brought Lesevre's husband and 15-year-old son in the cell. They were tortured in front of her eyes, but she still said nothing. Thus, Barbie's sadistic toolbox was empty. He hit his prisoner in the face with his fist and shouted in frustration: "I don't want to see this stupid woman anymore! Get rid of her!"

But Barbie's assistants did not kill Lesevre. A German soldier brought coffee to her at night and talked to her reassuringly. The following day she was sent by train to the concentration camp in Ravensbrück. After meeting with Barbie, it almost felt like being released.

Between torture sessions with Lesevre, Barbie was busy searching for the last Jews

hiding in Lyon, and on 6th April, 1944, he was ready for his most cynical atrocity of the war.

It was a warm morning at the orphanage on the hills outside Izieu. The children had been sent there by their parents so that they were safe from the Gestapo and concentration camps. Most of the children were Jewish, something ►

**Klaus Barbie joined the Nazi party at 22 years old in 1935 and was recruited to the security service. In 1942 he became the Gestapo chief in Lyon.**

WEINSTEIN/VERETT/ABL





► that the orphanage had tried to hide from the German occupying forces. This morning everyone sat in the dining room and drank hot chocolate when two trucks and a passenger car suddenly thundered into the courtyard and came to a sudden stop.

**A FEMALE EMPLOYEE** realised what was going on and screamed for everyone to run. A group of SS soldiers stormed into the house, tore the screaming children from the arms of the staff and threw them into the truck. The few who managed to get away were quickly brought back crying and carried to the courtyard.

27-year-old Lea Feldblum, managed to flee and hide in the woods. From there she saw everything that happened. In the confusion, a non-Jewish child was also thrown up on the lorry, but he was returned when his identity could be proved using the orphanage's register.

At the same time, Barbie and his assistant Dr Bartelmus stood a stone's throw away and looked on. When the trucks arrived in Lyon, Barbie wrote a short report to the German High Command:

"This morning an end was brought to the activities of the Jewish children's home at Izieu. A total of 41 children aged 3 to 13 were arrested. In addition, the whole of the Jewish population, ten persons including five women, were arrested. No money or other values were found. Transport to Drancy will take place on 7th April 1944." The short note was signed "Barbie".

Drancy was a collection point for arrested French Jews. Children and orphanage staff were forced into dirty cattle wagons at the train station, and then they were driven off to Auschwitz. Shortly after arrival they were murdered in the gas chambers.

On 6th June, 1944, the Allies initiated their invasion of France – D-Day – and while the blood flowed on the Normandy beaches, Klaus Barbie

## "EVERY DAY HE CAME SMILING INTO THE CELL AND KICKED HER OPEN WOUNDS"

hurried to seize the few remaining Jewish families still in Lyon. Married couple Lagrange and their 13-year-old daughter Simone thought liberation was close at hand when they heard news of the Allies' invasion on the radio in the morning. But shortly after, SS soldiers knocked on the door.

As the small family was being taken away, neighbours closed their windows and ignored their cries for help. It became "a day that started with joy and ended in sadness for us", lamented Simone Lagrange later. The family was accommodated in one of the suites in the hotel. Suddenly Barbie came in, dressed in a stylish grey suit and with a cat in his arms. He smiled at Simone, stroked her cheek and said she was pretty. "He cannot be evil since he loves animals", she thought.

**BARBIE WANTED TO KNOW** where the family's other two children were. He went straight up to 13-year-old Simone and slapped her. He tugged her hair and boxed her ears. Her parents cried and asked for mercy, but Barbie was ice cold. He placed Simone in isolation at Montluc prison, and during the week that followed, he tortured the little girl as if she were a hardened resistance fighter.

Every day he came smiling into the cell and kicked her open wounds. In the end, Barbie took Simone into her parents' cell and held her swollen bloody face up in front of her mother.

"See, now, what you've done to your daughter", hissed the Gestapo boss menacingly.



Che Guevara.

## Butcher of Lyon got new job in US

★ After the war, the US employed Klaus Barbie to hunt communists in Germany. In spite of French pressure to have him extradited, the Americans denied any knowledge of the Nazi.

To hide any embarrassing exposé, they helped Barbie escape to Bolivia. The Nazi helped the CIA and Bolivia's army to murder the guerrilla fighter Che Guevara in 1965.





FRANCIS AP/ESTEGUY/GETTY

But once more Barbie turned out to be an ineffective intelligence officer: the Lagrange family did not give him any information he could use. Soon the whole family was deported to Auschwitz, where they were separated. The mother was gassed to death immediately, while Simone and her father were put to work.

A year later, when the camp was evacuated during the last chaotic days of the war, father and daughter got a glimpse of each other. They almost managed to embrace, but then the father was suddenly ordered to his knees and murdered with a single shot. Against all odds, Simone Lagrange survived to tell her story.

**IN MID-AUGUST**, as Allied forces approached Lyon, Barbie sent as many prisoners as he could by train eastwards. But he retained 109 Jews and resistance members to use as a human shield when he fled to the airport in Bron on 23rd August.

When the Germans arrived at the plane, Barbie gave the ice-cold order that all hostages be shot and dumped in mass graves. Then he boarded a Luftwaffe plane and left France. The following day, the Allies rolled into Lyon and freed 950 despairing prisoners from

Montluc prison. The Gestapo's reign of terror was finally over.

Klaus Barbie deserted after a few months on the Western Front. Then he remained hidden for 38 years – first in Germany and later in South America – with the help of the CIA.

**IT WAS NOT UNTIL 1983** that his bloody past finally caught up with him. The former Gestapo executioner was traced by Nazi hunters Serge and Beate Klarsfeld to Bolivia. Then he was extradited to France, where he was convicted of crimes against humanity after a lengthy trial.

During the trial, the extent of Klaus Barbie's crimes came to light. The German murdered or ordered the killings of 4,342 people in the French resistance movement, and he deported 7,591 Jews – men, women and children – to German concentration camps, where most of them died. ★

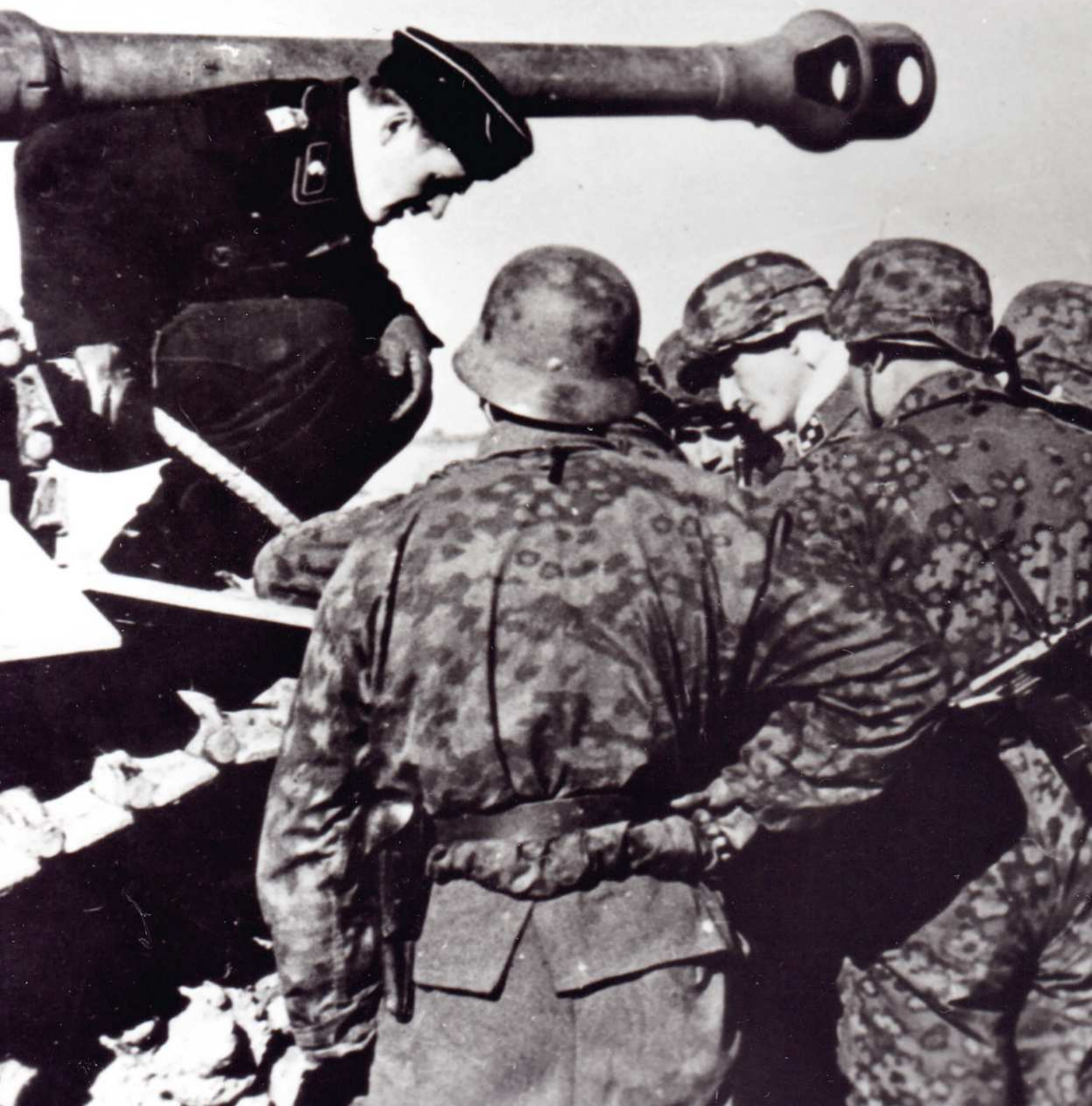
**Kasper Schlie** is a military historian.

**On 4th July, 1987 Klaus Barbie was sentenced to life imprisonment. French police led him out of the courtroom in Lyon. Barbie spent four years in jail before he died of leukaemia.**

**Further reading:** *The Devil's Agent* (2013) by Peter McFarren and Fadrique Iglesias ★ *Klaus Barbie: The Butcher of Lyons* (1984) by Tom Bower



# KZ GUARDS





# AT THE FRONT

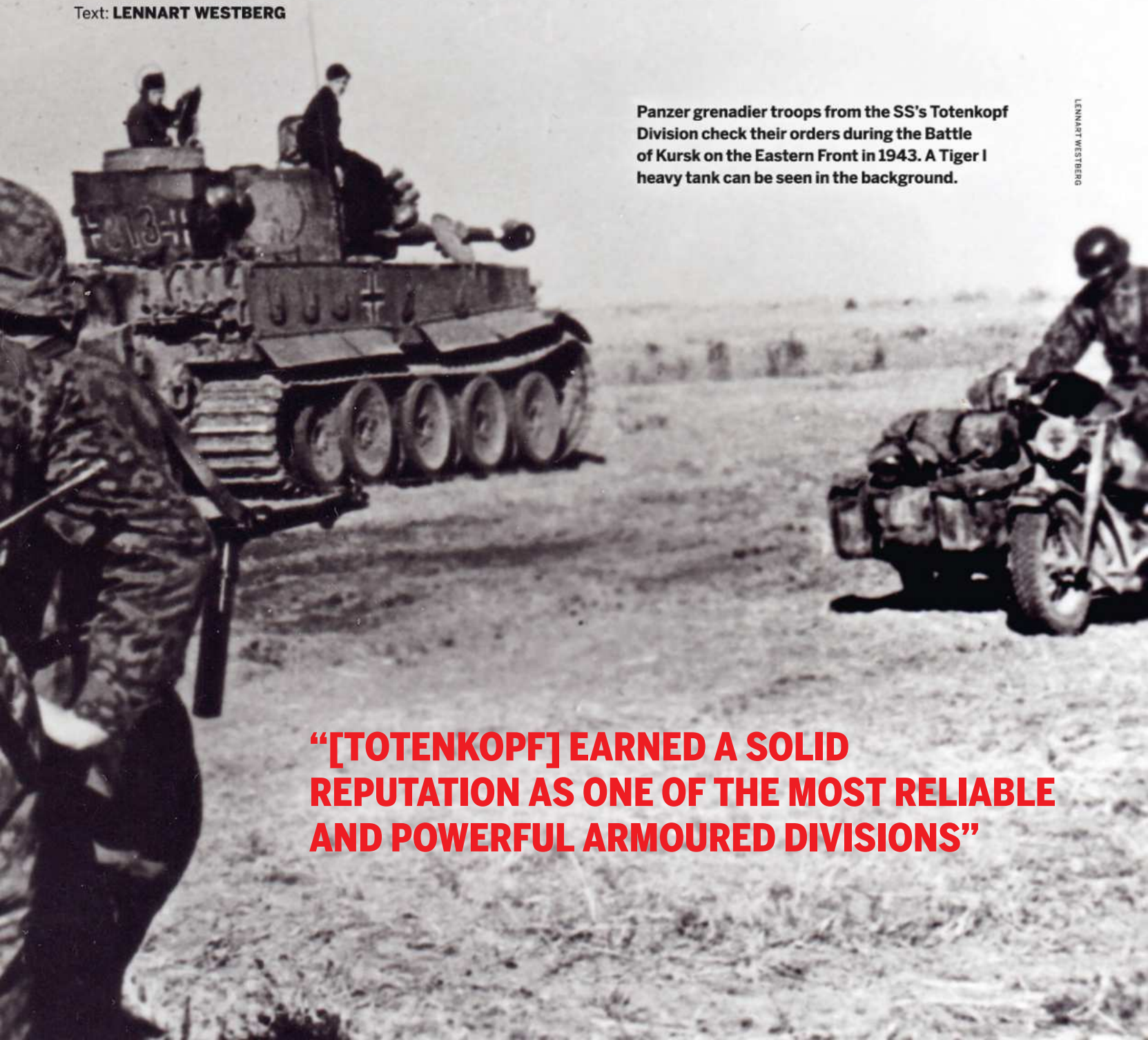
The armoured Totenkopf Division was infamous throughout France, Poland and the Soviet Union due to its brutal methods and ultra-aggressive tactics. Part of the Waffen-SS, the division recruited soldiers and officers from Nazi concentration camps.

Text: **LENNART WESTBERG**

Panzer grenadier troops from the SS's Totenkopf Division check their orders during the Battle of Kursk on the Eastern Front in 1943. A Tiger I heavy tank can be seen in the background.

LENNART WESTBERG

**“[TOTENKOPF] EARNED A SOLID REPUTATION AS ONE OF THE MOST RELIABLE AND POWERFUL ARMoured DIVISIONS”**





All the major totalitarian systems of the 20th century – fascism, communism and Nazism – have created pseudo-elite, paramilitary bodies that operate outside ordinary military and police controls. Examples include Mussolini's Black Shirts (*Milizia Volontaria*), Franco's *Falange Española*, the Soviet's NKVD elite divisions and Himmler's Waffen-SS. In addition to other duties, these special formations also provided an exclusive bodyguard for the respective country's state and party leaders.

The ideological and organisational model adopted by Totenkopf – the feared Waffen-SS division that fought on the Eastern Front from 1941 to 1945 – was based on revolutionary, paramilitary thinking.

**THE WAFEN-SS WAS** originally created as an armed branch of the Nazi's political militia, the SS. The term Waffen-SS described an umbrella organisation for a confusing conglomerate of armed, police-like, SS forces. Although some of these forces had been around earlier, many established themselves in the aftermath of the Nazi party's power grab in January 1933.

Under the dynamic leadership of Field Marshal Heinrich Luitpold Himmler, the German SS armed forces of the pre-war years grew into the multinational Waffen-SS of World War II, which, at its height, numbered more than one million soldiers. The organisation as a whole also became an effective



**The main entrance to the Dachau concentration camp. Theodor Eicke was the camp's second commander. Picture from 1934.**

instrument for state-sponsored surveillance, terror and murder both at home and in occupied territories.

**THE NOTORIOUS REICHSTAG** Fire arson attack that took place in Berlin in 1933 had already given Hitler's party a pretext to push through a decree undermining the freedom and rights of German citizens. Once the decree was in place, the Nazis quickly began to pursue other goals: the arrest of all political opponents and the systemic discrimination against German Jews.

An auxiliary and reserve police force was established to help achieve these goals. It was made up of personnel from the SA (the Sturmabteilung, the Nazi party's original brown-shirted paramilitary) and the SS. In parallel, 1933 also saw the SS recruiting

## Symbol stood for loyalty until death

★ The Totenkopf skull symbol was first associated with war in 1632 when Swedish general Åke Totts adopted it as a symbol for his cavalry regiment during the Thirty Years War. As a German military symbol, the death head emblem first appeared in the mid-16th century when Fredrick the Great's household guards began wearing a silver-coloured Totenkopf on their helmets. The use of the death head as a symbol of loyalty to the death continued throughout the 19th century in several Prussian forces. For example, during

WWI, the Totenkopf was used by special German units such as the tank regiments and was adopted by the nation's Stormtroopers in 1918, as well as by the Free Corps paramilitary factions in 1919.

The death head emblem was introduced as a symbol for the SS in 1923 by Julius Schreck, the first leader of Hitler's bodyguard. The organisation initially used the Prussian death head until 1934 when a stylised variant was added to the band of the SS uniform's caps. Guards in the concentration



**The death head emblem could be found on the caps of SS uniforms.**

camps had brown uniforms with two death heads on the collar until they were phased out in 1940-41 in favour of the Waffen-SS's grey-green uniform with the double-line SS emblem (*Siegrunen*).

The soldiers in Totenkopf Division kept the insignia of a skull on their right-hand collar until the end of the war. It's worth noting that the symbol's use went beyond the SS: several Wehrmacht forces also used the Totenkopf emblem, first and foremost the army's panzer divisions.





CHARLES TRANG

**Forced labour at Dachau concentration camp in 1934. In the middle, dressed in a brown SS uniform, is a camp guard from Oberbayern regiment.**

and training armed guards for the newly established concentration camps. Camp wardens wore brown uniforms with a death's head symbol (the *totenkopf*) on the collar of the uniform jacket. Initially called *SS-Wachverbände*, they were later renamed *SS-Totenkopfverbände*, or the Death Head unit.

**AS HISTORY SO** often teaches us, revolution devours its own children. During the Night of the Long Knives on 30th June, 1934, Hitler gave orders for the SS to assassinate all leading members of the SA, the paramilitary organisation that had helped him in his rise to power. The SA leadership had made the fatal mistake of insisting that the Wehrmacht (the regular German armed forces) should be merged with the SA to form a revolutionary, politicised army under its control. Hitler disagreed.

The leader of the SA, Ernst Julius Günther Röhm, was shot in his cell at Stadelheim Prison by Major General Theodor Eicke, commander of the Dachau concentration camp after Eicke supposedly created a list of “undesirable persons” the month before.

Many more SA leaders (and an array of other inconvenient political opponents) were also shot at the same prison by police officers and staff from Dachau, or taken to the barracks of Hitler’s

## “WAFFEN-SS WAS... CREATED AS AN ARMED BRANCH OF THE NAZIS’ POLITICAL MILITIA”

personal bodyguard (*Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler*) at Lichtenfelde where they were given one-minute trials then shot by firing squad.

The three-day killing spree proved that *Totenkopf* and the other armed SS units were loyal to Hitler alone. Their reward came on 20th July, 1934 when the soon-to-be-Führer made the SS an independent organisation and granted Himmler permission to form an armed division to serve alongside the Wehrmacht. But while senior Wehrmacht officers may have been glad to be rid of their upstart rivals in the SA, in reality they gained an even more dangerous opponent in the SS, which soon began an ambitious process of expansion that continued until 1945.

**RÖHM’S NOTION OF** a revolutionary, politicised army was by no means alien to Hitler and Himmler. ►





This photo shows Totenkopf soldiers being prepared for field action in 1939, including receiving instruction on how to use the MP 38 machine gun, the forerunner of the MP 40.



France, 1940. A soldier from the Totenkopf division takes a break from the fighting on a disabled French Somua S35 tank.

- The loss of imperial territories, the ruinous economic consequences of reparations and the dramatic reduction of military hardware and personnel at the end of World War I was a lasting trauma for the German people. To avoid such collapses in the future and to strengthen the Nazi party in the present, Himmler planned to create a politically reliable, elite management framework (*Staatsschutzkorps*) from all branches of the SS (including the 'Germanic' volunteers of the Waffen-SS). It was partly to administer the new "Greater German Reich", and partly for governing the Lebensraum project of ethnic cleansing and colonisation in the East.

**UNTIL 1939, THE** camp forces extended to four SS regiments, with a total of 6,500 men. At this time, there were six permanent concentration camps: Dachau, Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald, Mauthausen, Flossenbürg and Ravensbrück with 21,400 prisoners. These camps were subject to the Concentration Camps Inspectorate and Eicke, by now promoted to lieutenant general, was the boss. His personality greatly influenced the training and ideology of the Death Head guards at the concentration camps and

later, the soldiers recruited into the Death Head Totenkopf division of the Waffen-SS.

Eicke has often been overlooked by students of history, despite being one of the Reich's most influential SS leaders. As a new commander in Dachau in 1933, Eicke introduced a system of inhumane punishments that would be meted out to camp prisoners for the most minor infractions. Known as the Dachau System, the brutal regime became the model for all concentration camps as well as the SS extermination camps that developed in Poland later in the war. Eicke recruited and educated the camps' officers and guards to be masters of life and death.

**DURING HITLER'S INVASION** of Poland in the autumn of 1939, three Death Head regiments were placed under the command of Eicke: Brandenburg, Oberbayern and Thuringia. Drawing many of their recruits from the concentration camps, their objective was to follow the army and "pacify" occupied Polish territories. In reality, this meant killing members of the Polish leadership and clergy as well as teachers and other intelligentsia. They also murdered Polish Jews, disabled people and anyone deemed to be a rebel. The indiscriminate killings prompted Generaloberst Johannes Blaskowitz, a Wehrmacht district chief in occupied Poland, to pen a letter of protest. He sent it directly to Hitler's headquarters. It was ignored.

In October 1939, Hitler decided to form three new SS field divisions: SS Totenkopf, SS Verfügungsddivision (later renamed Das Reich) and SS Polizei Division (which was drawn from ►

**"THE NEW, RADICALISED OFFICERS WOULD BLINDLY FOLLOW ALL ORDERS"**



# Dachau's chief led Totenkopf division

★ Theodor Eicke was born in 1892 in Alsace, then a German territory. He was the son of a railway station master. During World War I he served both as an administrator and on the front line. When the war ended, like millions of other German soldiers, he ended up unemployed, impoverished and politically disillusioned.

In order to support his wife and children, Eicke attempted to pursue a career in the police, but was dismissed due to his repeated involvement in actions and demonstrations against the democratic government in Berlin. In 1930, Eicke joined the SS, then still a tiny force of 2,921 men. Chief of the SS Heinrich Himmler soon recognised Eicke as an unusually good organiser and, after just 15 months of service, he was promoted to the rank of colonel.

**DESPITE CLASHING** politically with Gauleiter Joseph Bürckel, who had him arrested and held in a mental asylum, Eicke was soon given a clean bill of health and further promoted by Himmler who tasked him with overseeing all concentration camp systems and personnel. The prickly but calculating Eicke even fought off the almighty Reinhard Heydrich when he

tried bringing the camps into his sphere of influence. Eicke was popular with camp personnel because of his simple, direct approach and the way he referred to his Death Head troops as a specially selected elite.

In the field, the Red Army discovered that Eicke, as chief of the Totenkopf Panzer Division, was a careful but hard opponent. His front-line troops shared the same merciless culture of callous superiority that Eicke encouraged in his camp guards. Whether under attack from Soviet T-34 tanks, Katyusha rocket launchers or infantry offensives, the Death Head Division proved itself a reliable member of the Nazis' Eastern Front mobile reserve, acting as "fire fighters" in crisis situations.

Eicke was decorated in 1942 with the Iron Cross for his actions at Demyansk.

**ACCORDING TO** Charles W Sydnor, "to his men Eicke was a soldier's general. Habitually near or in the thick of [the] fighting." He was probably the reason for the more relaxed atmosphere between the SS's officers and men compared to the strained relations between the Wehrmacht's ranks. In a letter penned in 1981, Joachim Ruoff, the commander of SS-Führungshauptamt, referred to Eicke



Theodor Eicke.

BUNDESARCHIV, BILD 146-1974-160-13A / CC-BY-SA 3.0

as "a national socialist who belonged to the left wing. I would even dare call him a social revolutionary."

On 26th February, 1943, during the German counter-offensive at Kharkov, Eicke's reconnaissance plane was shot down near the town of Artelnoye, killing the lieutenant general, pilot and an ordinance officer. If Eicke had survived the war, he would undoubtedly have been tried as a war criminal, primarily for his role as commander of the Concentration Camp Inspectorate. ■

Dachau was the first German concentration camp. It opened in March 1933. This image shows the camp in the 1940s.







ULSTEIN/GETTY

Totenkopf soldiers carrying Kar98k bolt action rifles camouflaged themselves with reeds to avoid the enemy.



CHARLES TRANG

The Sd Kfz 251, a German half-track AV unit fitted with a Soviet DShK heavy machine gun. Image from 1943.



CHARLES TRANG

A VW Schwimmwagen, an amphibious, four-wheel drive off-roader, crosses a river in France. Photo taken 1942 or 1943.

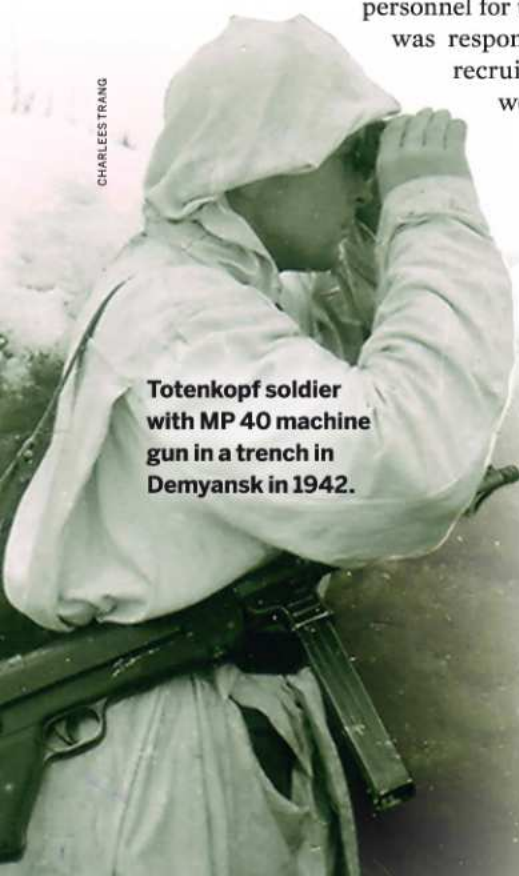
► the police). The problem, however, was to find personnel for the new divisions. The Wehrmacht was responsible for the deployment of new recruits and it ensured that the best men went to its units.

**HIMMLER'S INNOVATIVE RECRUITMENT** manager, Colonel Gottlob Berger, cut through this Gordian knot by transferring various headquarters and reserve police forces as well as trained personnel from Allgemeine SS to the new field divisions. Adding personnel from the Junker schools (where SS officers were trained) and various administrative units, he created a new combined force: the Waffen-SS. Himmler, it seems, was already gathering together the armed SS and police forces with the idea of turning them into a coherent SS Army Corps,

just as Röhm had wanted to do with the SA before the Night of the Long Knives.

While Berger busied himself finding new personnel, Himmler tasked Eicke with establishing the motorised infantry division Totenkopf. With his usual fervour, Eicke built it around his model concentration camp at Dachau. The three Death Head regiments that had been used in the "pacification" of Poland – Brandenburg, Oberbayern and Thuringia – formed the backbone of the infantry, while the local defence force SS Heimwehr Danzig provided the division's artillery. As a result, almost half of the division's 15,000 troops were drawn from concentration camp personnel with the remaining 8,000 men – who made up the communication, reconnaissance, engineering and artillery battalions – taken from the Allgemeine SS, the police or elsewhere in the Waffen-SS.

Eicke viewed the addition of non-camp personnel as a threat to the division's esprit de corps – in other words, the blind obedience he had come to expect from the guards in the concentration camps – but the lieutenant general's uncompromising personality



CHARLES TRANG

Totenkopf soldier with MP 40 machine gun in a trench in Demyansk in 1942.





**Totenkopf Division and its commander Lieutenant General Theodor Eicke successfully defended the so-called Demyansk Pocket south of Leningrad in the winter and spring of 1941-42.**

soon permeated the whole of the new division, which became known for both its strength and brutality.

Most of Totenkopf's senior command had military experience from World War I, and almost all had served in the *Freikorps* (Free Corps, a right-wing paramilitary militia organisation) in the two years following Germany's surrender. They had also served with Eicke in pre-war concentration camps and were blindly loyal to the lieutenant general.

In 1972, Berger revealed in a private letter that in the same way as Oberstgruppenführer Josef "Sepp" Dietrich believed he had dominion over Leibstandarte, Eicke perceived Totenkopf Division as his own "private empire" a fact that occasionally caused "a strained relationship with Himmler as the Reichsführer-SS [the SS's field marshal]".

**HITLER'S DECISION TO** suspend his offensive on the Western Front in the winter of 1939 proved to be a boon for Totenkopf. Eicke and his operations officer, Colonel Cassius Freiherr von Montigny, were given the opportunity to train the infantry and artillery in co-ordinated manoeuvres, to merge

## **"TOTENKOPF WAS FINALLY PUT INTO BATTLE AGAINST THE BRITISH AND FRENCH"**

battalions and send their most promising officer candidates to Junker schools.

In April 1940, Field Marshal Maximilian von Weichs, the head of the Wehrmacht, arrived to inspect Eicke's division. The aristocratic army man had never reviewed the troops before, but he had a poor opinion of the SS in general and thought of Totenkopf as a collection of thuggish bullies and street fighters. It was a surprise, therefore, when he discovered that the entire division was motorised and supremely mobile. Then to his further astonishment, Eicke's soldiers demonstrated advanced attack tactics in a minefield using live ammunition. By the time the inspection came to a ▶



► close, von Weichs was almost lyrical in his praise for the Death Head battalions and even asked Eicke to give his best to Himmler when he saw him again. It's clear that Eicke knew how to deal with his superiors when needed.

**THE SS ARMED** forces, including Eicke's Death Head troops, merged to form the Waffen-SS in 1940, bringing with them an ideology that was totally at odds with their Prussian military predecessors. The Nazis promoted men without any regard to social background or education, men who had no traditional reference systems and who were fully adapted to the purpose of the regime and its apocalyptic Lebensraum mission in the east. It was hoped that the new, radicalised officers would blindly follow all orders issued by the Führer, while disregarding traditional Christian values and established human rights.

Eicke's tactical prescription consisted of an uncomplicated formula: the division should concentrate all its fire-power on a single section of the enemy line and keep attacking it until the opponent either gave up or was wiped out. This principle, which was specially designed for officers who were poorly schooled in military tactics, guided the division's battle strategy throughout Eicke's period of command.

**HITLER'S INVASION OF** France and the Benelux countries began on 10th May, 1940. After being held in

reserve, Totenkopf was finally put into battle against the British and French forces that had been cut off and were trapped with their backs to the English Channel. On 19th May, Totenkopflinked with the 7th Army Division under Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's command at Cambrai. In the days that followed, Eicke's forces experienced considerable losses during minor clean-up operations, but they were about to experience much worse.

At Arras, two British combat battalions attacked the flank of Rommel's and Eicke's divisions, causing panic in the German ranks. Even Rommel lost his head and reported to his staff that he had been attacked by five British armoured divisions. Despite the fact that the British attack had been badly coordinated with the French forces, the result was still a hard lesson for the Totenkopf Division, which lost more than 100 men, 42 of whom were killed.

The British-French bridgehead at Dunkirk had an outer defence line, cut by watercourses. It was an easy position to defend, something Totenkopf learned to its cost when it tried to cross the La Bassée Canal and the upper course of the River Lys. The British, with their excellent Lee Enfield rifles, had the reputation of being first-rate shooters, and their fusillade was so intense and accurate that many of Eicke's soldiers thought they were being subjected to machine-gun fire.

The heavy infantry losses were a serious blow to the SS soldiers' perilously inflated pride and sense of cultural superiority. In the fighting that followed, Totenkopf and Leibstandarte perpetrated two separate war crimes that forever tarnished the reputation of the newly created Waffen-SS.

During the struggles at Bethune and Le Paradis, the British rearguard, recognising that the fate of the British Expeditionary Force was in their hands, fought a superb defensive action to buy time for the evacuation from Dunkirk. Major Heinz Bertling's Death Head regiment recklessly attempted to storm the well-camouflaged British machine-gun nests and sustained heavy losses as a consequence.

Bertling then lost radio contact causing chaos among the German command staff. An apoplectic Eicke screamed out an unintelligible series of commands and counter-commands further confusing the situation. Matters deteriorated when the capable von Montigny was suddenly invalidated by a haemorrhaging stomach ulcer and Colonel Hans Friedemann Götze, who had been sent to extricate the bungling Bertling, was killed by a British sniper.

**MEANWHILE, THE BRAVE** British rearguard fought until almost the last man. Defending the small hamlet of Le Paradis on 26th May, The Royal Norfolk Regiment continued its resistance until the men ran out of ammunition and it had shrunk to less than the ►

## "THE LOSSES WERE A SERIOUS BLOW TO THE SS SOLDIERS' PERILOUSLY INFLATED PRIDE"



These are the main battles in which Totenkopf participated. The map shows the modern-day national boundaries.



# Massacre at Le Paradis

★ On 26th May, 1940 in the small hamlet of Le Paradis a few miles north of Arras, Totenkopf captured the remains of a British battalion: 99 men from The Royal Norfolk Regiment under Major Lisle Ryder together with soldiers from The Royal Scots. The officer in command was First Lieutenant Fritz Knöchlein who ordered the prisoners of war to be disarmed and taken to a nearby farmhouse. Once there, the captives were lined up facing a barn wall and shot with two machine guns that were set up just before the prisoners arrived.

**ALTHOUGH KNÖCHLEIN'S** men were ordered to kill all survivors with bayonets and rifles, two British soldiers survived the massacre: Albert Pooley and William O'Callaghan. They crawled under the mound of corpses' and hid for three days before they were captured by another German army unit.

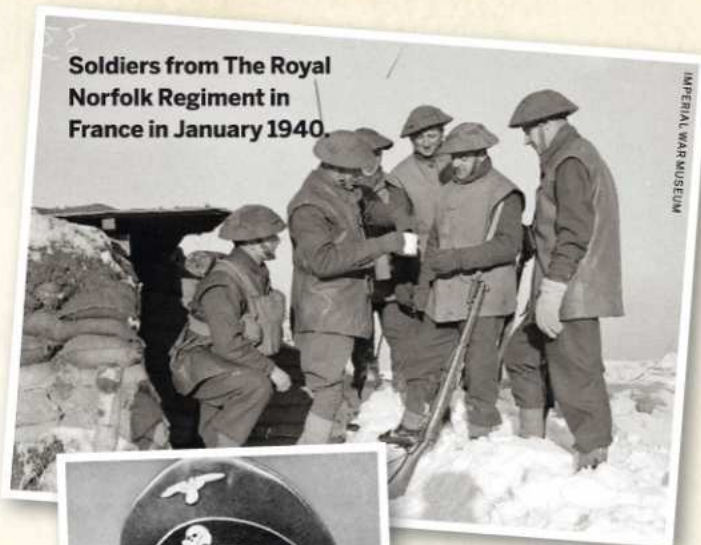
As a war invalid, Pooley was sent home in 1942, but the British authorities refused to believe his story. It wasn't until O'Callaghan, who had been held as a German prisoner of war, came back to Britain in 1945 and confirmed the tale that an official investigation was

launched into the war crimes at Le Paradis.

Information about the massacre spread within Totenkopf Division and reached the ears of Eicke's superior, General Ernst Erich Hoepner. The Wehrmacht man disliked the SS in general and Eicke in particular and initiated an investigation into the events at Le Paradis, hoping to get Eicke dismissed, but the attempt was unsuccessful, probably after Himmler intervened.

**KNÖCHLEIN'S CAREER** was not hurt by the Le Paradis incident. He advanced to lieutenant general and commanded the panzer grenadier regiment SS-Norway. He was also decorated with the Iron Cross after the Battle of Kurland in 1944. There is a note in Knöchlein's SS staff record made in October 1944 by

Soldiers from The Royal Norfolk Regiment in France in January 1940.



IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM



Fritz Knöchlein

Major General Joachim Ziegler that describes Knöchlein as "an extremely ruthless and cold-blooded man who, after a certain length of time, transforms a military force into a machine".

## ZIEGLER'S THEN

operating officer, Helmut von Bockelberg, confirmed in 1982 that Ziegler finally managed to dismiss Knöchlein from the Nordland Division at the end of 1944.

On 11th October, 1948 Knöchlein was found guilty of murder by a British military court in Hamburg. He was hanged in Hameln on 21st January, 1949. His 97 victims lie in a mass grave in Le Paradis' war cemetery. ★



A memorial stone over the victims now marks the location of the massacre in Le Paradis.



► size of a single company. The 99 survivors, many of whom were injured, finally surrendered to SS forces and were taken captive.

Soon after they were lined up in the courtyard of one of the hamlet's farmhouses and executed by machine gun fire on the orders of Totenkopf company commander Lieutenant Colonel Fritz Knöchlein. Those who survived the hail of bullets were stabbed with bayonets and left to die. Only two soldiers survived the massacre and were able to testify about the event after the war.

The day after, soldiers from Leibstandarte opened fire on 80 Allied prisoners of war, including a large group from The Royal Warwickshire infantry regiment, who had been under guard inside a barn



**Collar with the characteristic death head symbol worn by Totenkopf soldiers.**

near the French town of Wormhoudt. Both of these massacres were instigated on the initiative of the lower command, and the motives are unclear today. Perhaps it was frustration at the major losses suffered by the SS, simple revenge or something else entirely. The fact that the Death Head Division was established with a hard core of guards taken from the concentration camps would seem to be a contributing factor, though. Such men had become inured to the suffering of others after years spent violently punishing the unfortunate victims of the Nazi regime.

According to Professor Charles W Sydnor, author of *Soldiers of Destruction: The SS Death's Head Division, 1933-1945*, Totenkopf Division was also responsible for murdering hundreds of captive French colonial

ULLSTEIN/GETTY

**Totenkopf Panzer III tanks equipped with spaced armour plating roll over the Russian steppes near Oryol during the Battle of Kursk in July 1943.**





troops from Morocco and Senegal. According to the division's own war diary, one day's fighting resulted in "25 French prisoners and 44 dead Negroes". Sadly, there were many more entries of a similar nature.

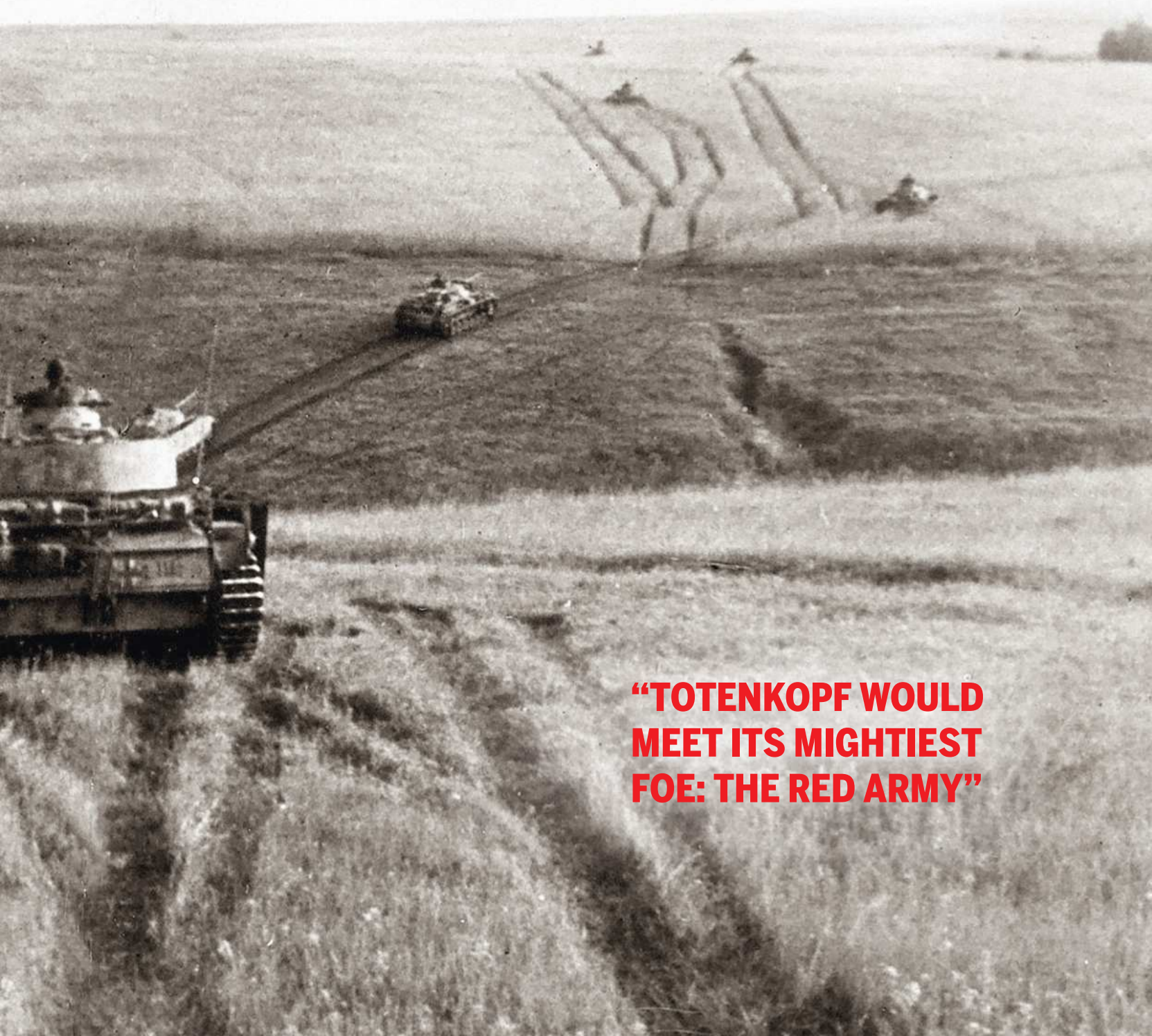
**DURING THE BATTLE** of France, The Death Head Division spent 18 days in combat and lost 1,152 men: ten percent of its total force. In the Wehrmacht's report of the campaign, the Waffen-SS force received no particular praise. Indeed, it was barely mentioned.

However, despite some dubious actions, Himmler's field units left France with valuable war experience and an enhanced reputation. Once it was motorised, the Waffen-SS always followed in the wake of the panzer divisions and

usually participated in the fiercest fighting. Its impressive attack record came partly from the SS soldiers' physical endurance and partly from their ideologically conditioned fighting spirit.

Between the campaign in France and Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, Totenkopf Division was stationed in southern France. Eicke, who in the autumn of 1940 realised that there would be a campaign in the East, used the time well. He reorganised his motorised regiments into more powerful combat groups (battle groups), each with its own infantry, artillery and anti-aircraft units along with communication and engineering support troops.

The result was greater firepower and increased mobility. He also intensified the political indoctrination ►



**“TOTENKOPF WOULD  
MEET ITS MIGHTIEST  
FOE: THE RED ARMY”**





U. LUTHE/GETTY

► of his soldiers, fully aware that Operation Barbarossa – the code name for the Axis invasion of the Soviet Union – would be a genocide that would result in the utter destruction of all “inferior races” and a closely related, yet hostile ideology.

The invasion of the East would serve two purposes: first it would be a crusade against “Jewish Bolshevism” and second it would be a colonial war for Lebensraum. It would also be where the Third Reich and Totenkopf would meet their mightiest foe: the Red Army.

**ON 3RD JUNE,** 1941, 55 trains transported Totenkopf east from Bordeaux to East Prussia. The division now entered Generaloberst Erich Hoepner’s 4th Army Group, which would lead the campaign through the Baltic states and on to Leningrad.

At 03.00 on 22nd June, 1941, the Third Reich invaded the Soviet Union. The army that marched

**Totenkopf soldiers are pictured during the Battle of Kursk in July 1943.**

east was the greatest concentration of combat forces in history. It was a giant, multinational invasion force. However, after initially appearing to prosper on all fronts, Hitler’s campaign stalled in early 1941 when it reached the outskirts of Leningrad and Moscow.

On 30th June, 1941 the Totenkopf Division crossed the river Düna (the Daugava in modern-day Latvia) and immediately became embroiled in intense fighting against the Red Army. In December, Eicke reported to Berlin that his losses numbered just under 9,000 men.

A decisive Soviet counter-attack left Totenkopf surrounded from February to April 1942 in the so-called Demyansk Pocket, close to Ilmen Lake in Russia. There, Eicke strengthened the core of a well-organised defence, but the losses were horrendous with 80 percent of the division dead, wounded or missing. Totenkopf’s campaign on the Eastern Front had lasted one year and had almost decimated the entire division. In August 1942, Totenkopf’s deputy commander Lieutenant General Max Simon reported to Himmler that Totenkopf Division was manning four miles of front line, even though they had just 52 officers and 2,685 soldiers at their disposal.

**HITLER WAS IMPRESSED** by the Death Head Division’s efforts in the Demyansk valley, and summoned Eicke to his headquarters several times

**“HITLER WAS IMPRESSED BY THE DEAD HEAD DIVISION’S EFFORTS IN DEMYANSK”**



in the summer of 1942. Hitler provided Eicke's new setup with a full tank regiment and, more importantly, a company of the new heavy Tiger tanks. On the personnel front, three quarters of the available positions had to be filled with new recruits. Their training took place in France from November 1942 to January 1943.

During March 1943, under the brilliant leadership of Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, Waffen-SS broke two Soviet armies in a counter-attack at Kharkov, thus stabilising the Eastern Front. Hitler credited Waffen-SS and the SS Panzer regiments, including the refitted Totenkopf Division, for the victories. Eicke wasn't around to hear the plaudits, though. The lieutenant general's reconnaissance plane had been shot down on the Eastern Front on February 26th, 1943 resulting in his death. But while Eicke was gone his Division fought on.

**IN THE SUMMER** of 1943, the Red Army suffered major losses in terms of men and machines at the hands of Hitler's forces at the pivotal Battle of Kursk. Ultimately, though, the campaign proved a strategic defeat for the Nazis, yet while Totenkopf fielded just a quarter of the number of tanks and infantry facing them, the division refused to cede an inch of ground to the two Soviet corps that opposed it during three days of brutal combat in mid-July, 1943.

In spring 1944, Army Group South was forced to retreat to southern Ukraine due to General Rodion Yakovlevich Malinovsky and General Fyodor Tolbukhin's advance across the river Dnestr. During three weeks in April, Totenkopf was an effective fighting rearguard for the 8th Army during its retreat to Romania.

**DESPITE HEAVY LOSSES**, the troop's fighting spirit remained undiminished, no doubt boosted by the arrival of the new Panther tanks in the same month. As April turned to May, Totenkopf linked with the Panzer Grenadier Division Großdeutschland to carry out successful holding actions at Târgu Frumos east of the Carpathian Mountains.

Operation Bagration was the codename for a major Red Army offensive against the central section of the German Eastern Front. The attack took place between 23rd June and 29th August, 1944 and resulted in the Soviets breaking through German lines, overrunning and subsequently breaking the 34 Divisions of General Ernst Bernhard Wilhelm Busch's Army Centre Group. As a result of the centre's collapse, Soviet forces were able to advance deep into enemy territory. Within four weeks they had liberated Belarus, occupied a large part of Lithuania and entered Poland. They reached Warsaw a short time after, but only having lost 700,000 men, twice the ►

## The British Totenkopf traitor

★ Born in Chiswick in August 1919, Thomas Cooper had a British father and a German mother. He blamed his heritage for his lack of success in job applications to the British services and in 1938 joined the British Union of Fascists. He then took a teaching post in Germany in mid-1939.

The outbreak of war changed everything: stranded and desperate, Cooper joined the Waffen-SS. By 1941, he had risen to the rank of lance corporal and was stationed with the Totenkopf Division near Krakow.

Francis Maton, a British POW, recalled the SS NCO boasting of the type of actions he was party to. Cooper was leading a squad of Ukrainians during a purge of the Krakow ghetto. In the top flat were 20 or so Jews being held at gun point by his men who gleefully explained to Cooper that "they had found a new way of killing Jews. This was done simply by opening the window wide



**Mugshot of Thomas Cooper taken in 1945 before his trial for high treason at the Old Bailey in January 1946.**

and two men each grabbing an arm and a leg and flinging the Jew through the open window. The small children and babies followed their parents".

After the war, Cooper was sentenced to hang for high treason, but received a last-minute reprieve and was given a life sentence instead.



**Cooper boasted about the murder of Jews in the Krakow ghetto that he was supposed to help guard.**



► number of the Germans. On 27th June 1944, Field Marshal Walter Model replaced the disgraced Busch as the commander of Army Group Centre. Model extricated the remains of the group and asked for reinforcements to establish a new line of defence along the Vistula river in Poland.

**IN JULY, THE** newly fitted 5th SS Panzer Division Wiking marched from its SS training camp east of Dębica towards Białystok, while Totenkopf and Großdeutschland were transported to Siedlce. The three panzer divisions combined to form IV SS Panzer Corps under General Herbert Otto Gille. Totenkopf was at the forefront of the new formation, helping to defend the strategically important city of Grodno, once again in the face of numerically superior Soviet forces.

**ON 14TH AUGUST, 1944,** fighting broke out around the area north-east of Warsaw when units from Marshal Konstantin Rokossovsky's Belorussian Front attacked IV Panzer Corps. For a full

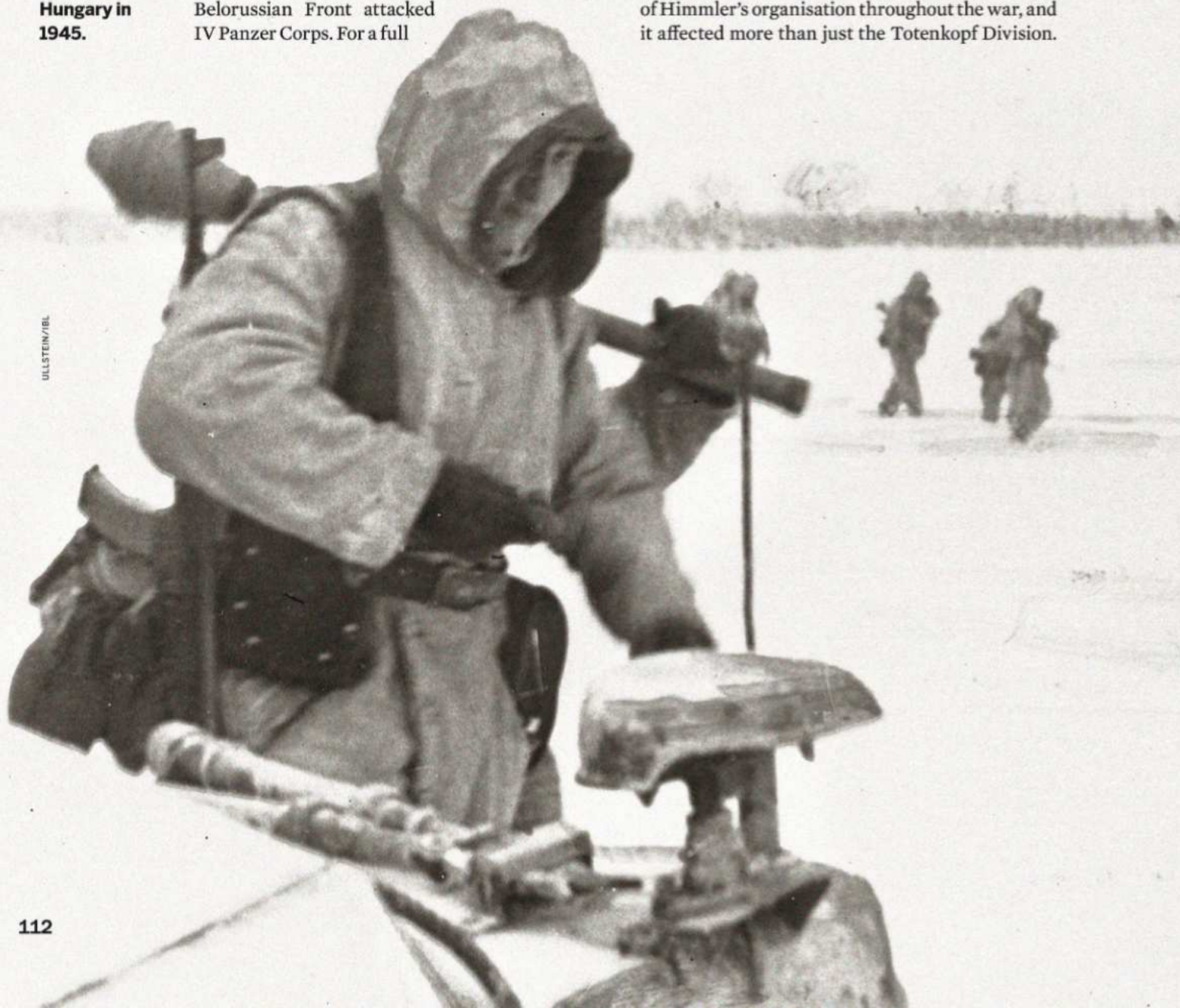
week, Totenkopf and Wiking repelled attacks from 15 Soviet sniper divisions and five Panzer brigades. During the renewed Soviet offensive against Warsaw, Totenkopf mounted a skilled counter-attack on 11th September to retake the district of Praga and, miraculously, break the massed Soviet attacks.

Totenkopf crowned its remarkable efforts in the region when it, together with Wiking and the 19th Army Division, held off the Soviet 5th Guards Tank Army during its attack on Modlin, causing the Red Army to abandon new offensive actions in the area.

By this time, the Death Head Division, with its remarkable ability to both attack and defend, had earned a solid reputation as one of the most reliable and powerful armoured divisions in the German Armed Forces. At the same time, the force's men continued to be characterised by the SS's institutionalised brutality.

**THE ROTATION OF** personnel between guard duty at the concentration camps and front-line action with the Waffen-SS was a conscious policy of Himmler's organisation throughout the war, and it affected more than just the Totenkopf Division.

**Totenkopf soldiers armed with panzerfaust anti-tank missile launchers and Sturmgewehr 44 rifles advance during Hitler's last offensive in Hungary in 1945.**



ULLSTEIN/IBL



However, most of the original camp guards who had been recruited by Totenkopf were already buried in Russia, having fallen at the front in 1942. They were replaced with recruits indoctrinated with an even more cold-blooded ideology. Likewise, the original officer corps had been “shot to pieces” in the inferno on the Eastern Front. They were replaced by leaders with more tactical education. The brutal ideology of the Death Head Division continued, however, probably perpetuated by surviving senior officers.

Operation Spring Awakening, Hitler’s last major offensive of the war, was largely left in the hands of the Waffen-SS divisions. The operation’s goal was to secure the Hungarian oil reserves that lay south of Lake Balaton and drive the Red Army back across the Danube. The operation, which took place in March 1945, saw the highest number of German elite divisions ever assembled for a single operation, and Totenkopf was one of them. After making good progress initially, the muddy terrain and strong Soviet resistance eventually caused the attack to stall. The Red Army regained its footing and, with an overwhelming numerical advantage,

launched a counter-attack that ripped the German forces to shreds.

**BY MID-APRIL 1945** Germany’s defeat was a fact. Totenkopf was pulled back to help defend Vienna, but the task proved impossible and the division was finally broken.

The last surviving troops of 3rd SS Panzer Division Totenkopf surrendered in May 1945 to US forces. The Americans left them to the mercy of the Soviets. Ironically, as captives of a regime every bit as pitiless and brutal as their own, all that awaited the last Death Head soldiers was the horror of life in a forced labour camp. ❖

Lennart Westberg is a military historian.

Further reading: **Soldiers of Destruction. The SS Death’s Head Division** (1990) by Charles W Sydnor.

**SS ELITE FORCE  
LIBERATES MUSSOLINI**



**“ALL THAT AWAITED THE LAST DEATH HEAD SOLDIERS WAS THE HORROR OF LIFE IN A FORCED LABOUR CAMP”**



# SS FORCE'S BOLD RAID

In 1943, Italy's dictator Benito Mussolini was deposed and kidnapped during a coup d'état. His fascist regime was toppled in a single day. In Nazi Germany, Adolf Hitler gave a group of special-trained SS men orders to find and free Mussolini. They planned and carried out one of the war's most fearless actions.

Text: **MORTEN RENDSMARK**

On 29th July, 1943, SS officer Otto Skorzeny clicked the heels of his boots together and stretched his right arm to greet Adolf Hitler personally. The meeting took place at *Wolfsschanze* (Wolf's Lair), a complex of camouflaged concrete bunkers that made up the Führer's headquarters in East Prussia.

"I have a mission of the highest importance for you", Hitler said. "Yesterday Mussolini, my friend and our loyal partner in the struggle, was betrayed by his king and arrested by his own compatriots."

The Führer continued: "Mussolini must be rescued, and speedily, otherwise they will deliver him up to the Allies. I therefore entrust you with

this mission; its successful outcome will be of incalculable bearing upon the development of future military operations." Skorzeny had been given a politically delicate mission.

**OTTO SKORZENY STOOD** 1.95 m (6' 6") tall, and the muscular Austrian was head of the SS-Sonderverband zbV "Friedenthal". This was a small group of carefully selected SS soldiers who Skorzeny had been training since 1942 to carry out espionage and sabotage behind enemy lines.

The Friedenthals were weapons and explosive experts, and many had a technical education and spoke foreign languages fluently. ►



## "Europe's most dangerous man"

★ Otto Skorzeny was both famous and infamous during the war. The Allies called him "Europe's most dangerous man". They feared, among other things, that he would abduct Allied commander Dwight D

Eisenhower. Skorzeny's facial scar was inflicted during a rapier duel he fought as a student in Vienna before the war. The scar was considered to be a mark of honour and also a sign of courage.





German paratroopers storm the high-altitude Campo Imperatore where Mussolini was held captive.



► During training, the elite soldiers had to learn to drive various vehicles including motorcycles, locomotive engines and tanks. They also learned to ride, swim and convincingly adopt false identities. Skorzeny was an engineering graduate from the University of Vienna and an army veteran, playing roles in the invasions of Belgium, Holland and France in 1940 and the Soviet Union in 1941, where he was injured and repatriated. Back in Germany, the Austrian had taken up training the Friedenthals, who were now about to face their first action.

**ON 25TH JULY** – four days before Skorzeny's meeting with Hitler – Italy's fascist dictator Benito Mussolini had been set aside by a coup d'état. The Italian king Victor Emanuel and Marshal Pietro Badoglio had ordered Italian police to arrest the dictator after a meeting in the royal palace in Rome. Police officers had placed Mussolini into an ambulance and led him to a secret place under tight guard. The official word claimed that Mussolini had



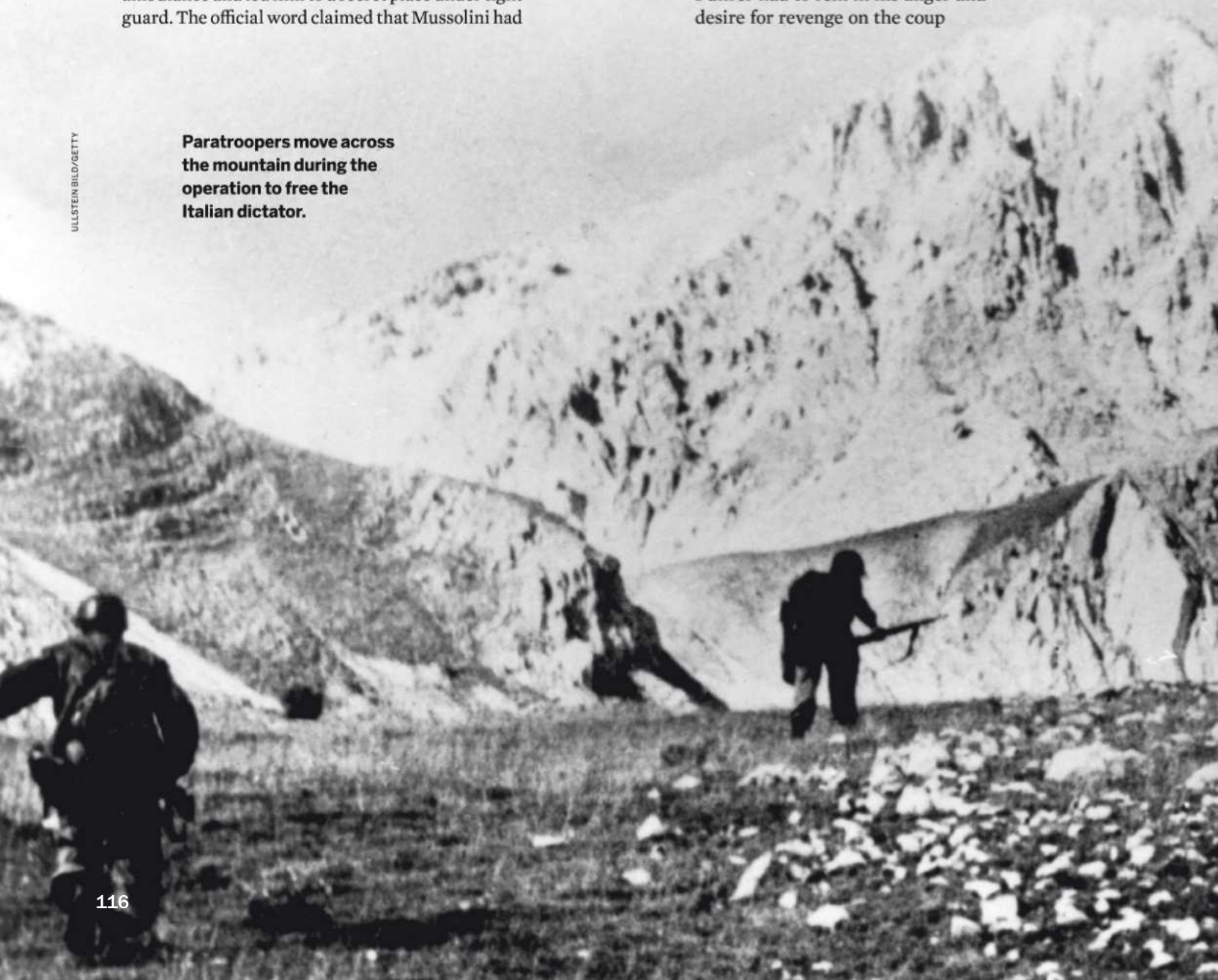
**Benito Mussolini at the height of his power.**

voluntarily surrendered power to the king and a new government under Badoglio.

The situation in Italy left Nazi Germany extremely vulnerable. Before the coup, both countries had joined forces in the war, but the new Italian government was playing a double game. It was secretly negotiating peace with the British and Americans, its aim to pull the country out of the war. But publicly it continued to assure Hitler that Italy would fight beside its German ally to the end. The "promise" revealed Italy's fear of German reprisals and a possible Nazi occupation of the Italian mainland.

**IN GERMANY, HITLER** raged over the fact his friend and ally had been removed by coup. He still had German troops in Italy and his immediate thought was to occupy the country by force, locate Mussolini and reinstate him as dictator. But with only around three army divisions to call on, the Führer had to rein in his anger and desire for revenge on the coup

**Paratroopers move across the mountain during the operation to free the Italian dictator.**



ULLSTEIN BILD/GETTY



plotters. He also feared the Italians would turn against him if he retaliated too violently. But at the same time, the German dictator suspected the king and Badoglio would be negotiating a secret peace with the Allies. This was a serious threat, because if Italy surrendered, the Allies could occupy southern Italy and open another front against Germany. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had even described Italy as “Europe’s soft underbelly”.

**PEACE TALKS BETWEEN** the Italians and the Allies took six weeks. The reason for this was that the Allies were initially suspicious of the people behind the coup who had previously supported Mussolini. But on 9th September, they signed a ceasefire agreement, where Italy surrendered unconditionally. The country now officially stood on the side of the Allies in the war.

Hitler swiftly reinforced his presence in Italy, increasing German troops from three to eight divisions. Many were immediately in combat, particularly south of Naples, where the Americans

**“THE FÜHRER HOPED THAT A LIBERATED AND REINTEGRATED MUSSOLINI WOULD BRING ITALY BACK OVER TO THE NAZIS.”**

had landed. Other German forces moved to disarm one million Italian soldiers. The king and Badoglio fled from Rome to southern Italy to come under Allied protection. The Germans had now occupied northern and central Italy while the British and US were laying claim to southern Italy. Somewhere in this storm, Mussolini remained under the guard of the Carabinieri, Italy’s military police. Badoglio had given them a clear order: Mussolini must be shot if the Germans tried to free him.

It was a nightmare situation for Skorzeny. His reputation with Hitler depended on whether it would be possible to find and free Mussolini before the Italian ex-dictator was shot or handed over to the Allies. The German Führer hoped that a liberated and reintegrated Mussolini would bring ►





BUNDESARCHIV, BILD 101-567-1503C-31/TONI SCHNEIDERS/CC-BY-SA 3.0



German gliders were built for surprise attacks. They landed on the ground on long metal rods. Each aircraft carried ten men including the pilot. But this was the first time they had landed on a mountain.

- Italy back over to the Nazis. Immediately after his meeting with Hitler on 29th July, Skorzeny travelled to Italy where he set to work with German agents and General Kurt Student, who was commander of Germany's paratroopers. They had tracked down Mussolini, who was interned on the small island of Ponza just off Naples, but by the time the Germans arrived, the former dictator had been removed.

Throughout August, conflicting rumours circulated as to where Il Duce was being held. Many had been spread by Italian intelligence service agents who were loyal to Badoglio and the king. For weeks, the Germans pursued false trails.

**DUE TO THE** complicated political situation in Italy in August 1943, Skorzeny and Student did not use arrests and torture against the Italians. Instead, they made queries with German soldiers stationed around the country, and it was mainly via these that they gained intelligence. One of these pieces of information came from the small island of La Maddalena off Sardinia where a Russian naval officer in the area had heard rumours that Mussolini was being held in a large villa there.

One of Skorzeny's men, whose name was Robert Warger and who spoke fluent Italian, was sent to the island disguised as a sailor to talk to the locals. He challenged some Italians to bet on where Badoglio had hidden Mussolini.

A local fruit supplier accepted the wager and revealed that Mussolini was in a secluded villa.

**“THE GERMANS WOULD HAVE TO LAND ON A ROCKY MOUNTAIN RIDGE USING GLIDERS”**

AFTER THE BATTLE



Hotel Campo Imperatore – from the front door, the German leader could see Mussolini through one of the two windows where he was held captive.

Warger spied on the villa and found that the site was guarded by around 150 Carabinieri. In addition, a Red Cross seaplane was anchored near to the villa.

Skorzeny immediately began planning an operation that would involve seaplanes and high-speed motorboats. But before he could get his men, vehicles and equipment into place, Mussolini was again moved.

Just after Warger had found the villa, the Red Cross plane disappeared, and the guard was cut to just a few men. The bird had been spirited away from under Skorzeny's nose, and the Italian word “fiasco” rang in his ears. The search would have to begin again; Mussolini could once again be anywhere.

**IN GERMANY, HITLER'S** propaganda minister Goebbels began to doubt whether Mussolini would ever be found and liberated. For Goebbels, it would have been a welcome propaganda coup if they were to free Mussolini. In the summer, a major German offensive on the Eastern Front had gone badly wrong, and German troops were despondent. At the same time British and Americans advanced in southern Italy, and their bombers had left the German port city of Hamburg in ruins. Pessimism also took hold of the propaganda minister, whose job it was to keep up the German fighting spirit.

Around the beginning of September, the Germans struck gold again when one of their surveillance units intercepted an interesting message in Italian: “Security measures around Gran Sasso completed. Cueli”. The message was duly sent on to General Student's headquarters in Frascati, outside Rome.

Student initially dismissed the message because of earlier false trails, but when he and Skorzeny inspected a water aerodrome on Lake Bracciano to



# SS landed in the mountains

After the war, Otto Skorzeny designed a map of the mountain ridge, the ski hotel and the gliders' landings. It shows the course of everything that happened.

**1** At 14.00, the first plane landed by SS commander Skorzeny lands. The plane glides over the mountain ridge and stops just 15 metres from the ski hotel on a slight slope in front of it. From there the first SS paratroopers storm the hotel.

**3** A propeller aircraft lands and takes up position on the mountain ridge. The plane heads down the hillside and leaves at 15.50 with Mussolini and Skorzeny on board. From there, Mussolini flies to a German base near Rome and on to Austria the same day.

**2** Skorzeny runs behind the hotel (dotted line). He climbs up on the platform in front of the building. There he sees Mussolini in a window on the third floor. Then he storms the entrance, knocks over a pair of guards and runs into the foyer. Eventually, more aircraft arrive with German paratroopers who occupy the plateau.

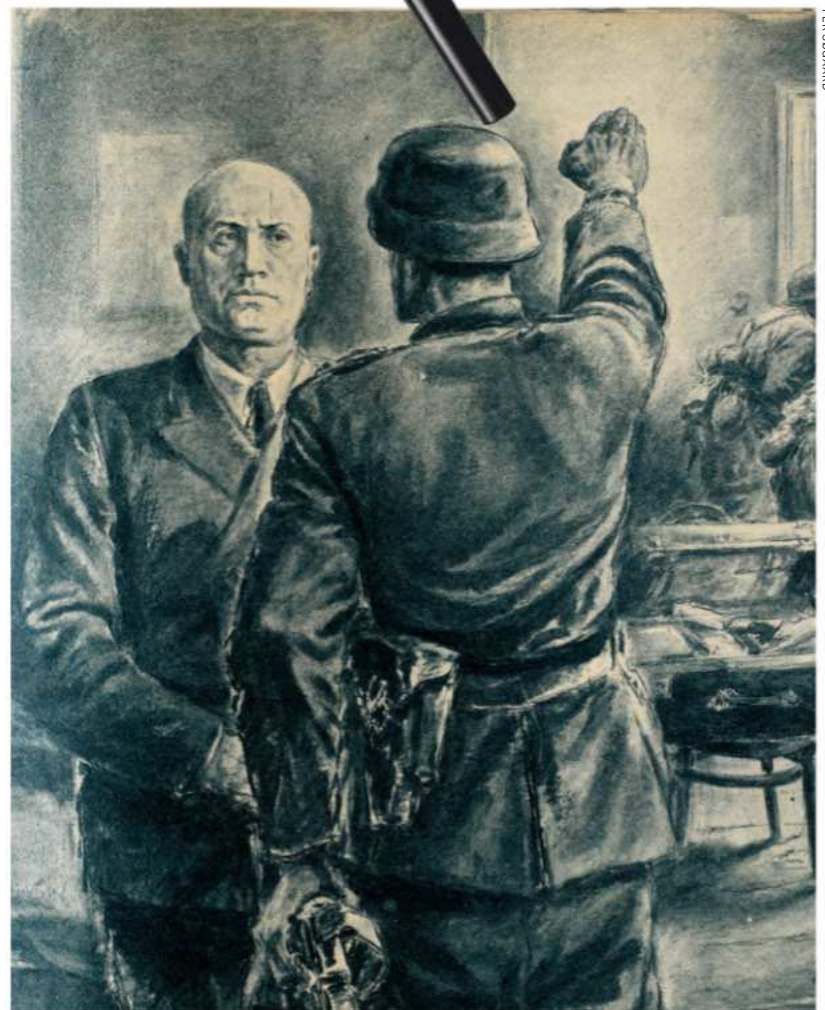
the north of Rome on 4th September, the commander heard from an eyewitness who saw an Italian Red Cross seaplane land on Bracciano and then, shortly afterwards, an ambulance drive off in a convoy of other cars.

**STUDENT IMMEDIATELY CONNECTED** the dots linking the Red Cross seaplane on the Bracciano lake with the villa at La Maddalena, at which point the radio transmission also came back into his mind.

Gran Sasso forms part of the Apennine mountain range that runs down the Italian peninsula. On a plateau 2,100 metres above sea level lay the ski hotel Campo Imperatore, accessible only by cable car. The height at Gran Sasso was critical: the paratrooper commander knew that the air was too thin and wind conditions too unstable to allow paratroopers to be dropped over the hotel. The cable car couldn't be used either – the journey up to the hotel would take at least 10 minutes, plenty of time for them to be spotted by the Italians.

Both Student and Skorzeny knew that surprise was essential. The guards had to be overpowered before they could get to the ex-dictator. Only one very special kind of operation could liberate Mussolini. The Germans would have to land on a rocky mountain ridge using gliders. The planes consisted of metal rods covered with canvas, and during a landing, the machines slid on long metal rods along the hull to come to a halt. But the planes were designed to land on a relatively flat grassy surface, not a sloping mountain crest.

**UNDETERRED, SKORZENY AND** Student immediately began to plan their assault on Hotel



Four minutes after landing, Skorzeny stood in front of Mussolini. "The Führer sent me", he said. The drawing is taken from the German Propaganda paper Signal, which featured the operation in great detail.





The plane that will take Mussolini is prepared for take-off down the rocky mountain ridge. The paratroopers and SS soldiers look jubilant with some Italian prisoners who have surrendered.



Mussolini is followed to the plane, designed for a pilot and one passenger. In spite of this, SS commander Skorzeny also climbs on board.

- Campo Imperatore. They sent to Germany for gliders, while Skorzeny – along with his adjutant Karl Radl – climbed aboard a bomber equipped for aviation photography. But the camera did not work. When the bomber flew over the mountain at a height of 5,000 metres, Skorzeny opened a hatch and leaned his upper body out into the ice-cold air. Using a handheld camera, Skorzeny snapped pictures of the plateau where Campo Imperatore was located.

When the images were developed, however, the quality was so poor that Skorzeny and Radl couldn't discern much from them. They were able to determine that the hotel appeared to be on flat ground. Skorzeny's only other form of reference was a tourist brochure from the hotel, but its photos weren't very detailed. Skorzeny was unable to formulate a comprehensive outline of the hotel. He didn't know where doors and entrances were located or how the interior was laid out.

**THE AERIAL RECONNAISSANCE** of Campo Imperatore took place on 8th September. On the same day, the Allies broadcast radio news that the Italian government had signed a ceasefire agreement, signalling their unconditional surrender. Italy now sided itself with the Allies and became – at least on paper – the Germans' enemies. Time was now scarce for Skorzeny and his men who feared that Mussolini would now be handed to the British and Americans. But the gliders had to be transported from Germany, and would only arrive in Italy on the morning of 12th September.

The plan was that the planes would fly the same day they arrived from Pratica di Mare, a little south of Rome, to Gran Sasso. The trip was calculated at 60 minutes. A few hours earlier, a column of soldiers on motorcycles, cars and trucks would drive to – and then capture – the cable car's base station, located

in the Aquila valley. The glider landing on the mountain and the attack on the cable car station in the valley would need to be synchronised to ensure the Germans didn't lose the element of surprise.

**THE GLIDERS WOULD** be drawn by propelled aircraft using long steel wire ropes and finally arrived in Italy late in the morning of the 12th. As the gliders arrived at Student's air base, equipment was to be immediately loaded onboard, but their departure was delayed as the air alarm suddenly sounded and Allied bombers attacked the runway. Luckily, none of the aircraft had been hit, and the mission could proceed at 13.00.

10 gliders in all departed from the base, each carrying 10 men including the pilot. Two gliders were manned with Skorzeny's men, while the others housed Student's paratroopers.

Along the way, the flying convoy would have to pass over the foothills of the Apennines through dense cloud. The two gliders leading the way swung around in a big circle to gain altitude before passing over. But the gliders following missed the manoeuvre because they were still inside a cloud bank. It was only when the clouds parted that they discovered the first two aircraft had vanished. In the third was Skorzeny, and when his pilot asked who would now lead the convoy, Skorzeny answered: "We'll take over the lead ourselves!" The remaining gliders fell into line and all flew over the Apennines.

With a knife, Skorzeny cut holes in the glider's canvas to determine how far the convoy had come. Underneath, the commando watched as the motorcycles from the column that were to attack the cable car station made their way up the Aquila valley. Everything had gone to plan so far, except the first two planes had now fallen behind because of their circling manoeuvre in the foothills. Skorzeny's



## **“THE SOUND OF TEARING CANVAS, GRINDING METAL RODS AND THE SCRAPE OF THE HULL OVER STONY GROUND CUT THROUGH THE CREW’S EARS.”**

glider also contained the Italian General Fernando Soleti. The general had agreed to participate in the risky action; his task was to persuade the 200 or so Italian guards to spare Mussolini.

Through scattered clouds, Skorzeny was able to determine that the air convoy was approaching Gran Sasso and the hotel. “Slip the tow ropes!” he shouted to the pilot. The plane that towed Skorzeny’s glider through the air disappeared, leaving just the noise of the wind behind. Both the glider pilot and Skorzeny examined the landing zone. The area looked relatively flat from the aerial photos taken, but now the crew could see its incline was more like a ski slope.

Nevertheless, the pilot set the glider down so it could slide down the slope to a halt. The sound of tearing canvas, grinding metal rods and the scrape of the hull over stony ground cut through the crew’s ears. By chance, the glider – by now almost completely destroyed – stopped just 15 metres from one corner of the hotel. Skorzeny and his men ran out of the airplane door, which had been ripped from its hinges during landing and stormed the hotel. “Hands in the air”, they yelled in Italian to some startled guards. The reluctant General Soleti was ushered out of the plane, shouting with the full force of his lungs, “Don’t shoot!”

**SKORZENY THEN RAN** through the nearest door, where he discovered a radio operator sitting on a chair. The Austrian kicked the chair from under the Italian and smashed the radio with the butt of his machine gun. The radio room led nowhere, so Skorzeny quickly exited. He then ran around the back of the hotel looking for an entrance. He found a terrace at the end of the wall – a pair of German soldiers lifted him onto it, where he found himself at the front of the hotel. Running along he spotted an unmistakable bald profile in a second-floor window: Mussolini. Skorzeny immediately shouted, “Duce, get away from the window!” The commander feared the former dictator might get caught in any crossfire.

Skorzeny and his SS troops came to the main hotel entrance, where a couple of Italian soldiers were standing guard with machine guns. But ▶



**The flimsy Fieseler Storch takes off from Gran Sasso. The pilot deliberately dives beyond the ridge as the plane needs momentum to rise.**



► before the Italians could react, they were tossed aside by the tall, muscular Skorzeny. Not a single shot had been fired. Inside the foyer, the Italians panicked. Any carabinieri who tried to block Skorzeny were pushed aside and held back by the SS commandos.

Skorzeny now ran up the stairs with one of his officers at his heel. When the Germans reached the second floor, Skorzeny passed through a door to one of the hotel rooms. In the room was Mussolini guarded by two Italians, whom Skorzeny's officer quickly bundled out into the hallway. "Duce, the Führer has sent me! You're free", Skorzeny told Mussolini. The ex-dictator embraced his rescuer before answering: "I knew my friend Adolf wouldn't desert me."

**ONLY FOUR MINUTES** had passed from the second Skorzeny ran out of the glider to the moment he stood before Mussolini. Outside, the other gliders had landed or were in the process of landing. From an Italian perspective, it had been a terrifying sight because the gliders emerged suddenly from the clouds before landing quickly with a shattering sound. The German troops then swiftly stormed both the hotel and the upper cable car station. Everywhere, Italian carabinieri were so paralysed by shock that they surrendered without battle. At the same time, the motorised German column had seized control of the cable car station in the valley – here, two Italians were killed during the battle. On the mountain one of the gliders crashed to the ground through a sudden gust of wind. Several on board were severely injured, but all survived.

A Fieseler Storch – a flimsy single propeller plane designed for one pilot and one passenger – arrived at Gran Sasso at 15.00. The plane would deliver Mussolini to the airport at Pratica di Mare, but Skorzeny insisted on flying in the small plane too. The commando had no intention of letting his



**Mussolini lands in Germany after his liberation, where Hitler receives him. Soon after, Mussolini becomes dictator in Northern Italy. But he has lost his former charisma.**

prize out of his sight. The pilot, who only managed to land with difficulty on the mountain ridge, had other ideas, refusing to take anyone other than Mussolini. He pointed out that the Italian weighed more than the average passenger, and that Skorzeny was also too heavy.

The fact the plane would have to lift off from a rocky hillside made it dangerous enough with just a single passenger onboard, but after some discussion, Skorzeny persuaded the pilot to take both him and Duce. Mussolini sat down in the passenger seat, while Skorzeny squeezed himself into the cramped space behind the seats.

**THE STORCH HAD** decent suspension, but not much horsepower. It set off bumping down the hillside easily enough, but suddenly the pilot spotted a ditch running across the slope. He pressed the throttle as if to take off and the plane "jumped" over the ditch, after which the wheels once again bumped over the slope. The German soldiers on the mountain stared nervously at the plane as it reached a point where the slope became even steeper. They watched the plane swoop over the edge, but just as they feared the worst, the plane lifted its nose and continued down the valley.

The pilot had consciously performed a nosedive to generate enough speed to take off. Yet again Skorzeny had taken a bold risk, almost insane.

When the Storch landed at the German air base Pratica di Mare in Rome, Mussolini and Skorzeny boarded a transport plane bound for Vienna Airport that night. From here, the odd couple travelled to

**"THEN HITLER HIMSELF CALLED, PROMOTING SKORZENY FROM HAUPTSTURMFÜHRER (CAPTAIN) TO STURMBANNFÜHRER (MAJOR)"**



the upmarket Hotel Imperial, where they were initially rejected by the receptionist. But when the concierge learned they'd reserved rooms under the name of Mussolini, he quickly served them. The deposed dictator immediately went to bed, but Skorzeny stayed up to celebrate his success with a glass of wine. Soon after, the phone rang. The first to congratulate him was SS chief Heinrich Himmler.

Then Hitler himself called, promoting Skorzeny from *hauptsturmführer* (captain) to *sturmbannführer* (major). Later, Hermann Göring rang, and a German colonel in Vienna arrived at Hotel Imperial to personally deliver the Iron Cross military order to the commando. Otto Skorzeny had become the Nazis' most famous war hero – and even the British would express a reluctant admiration for his bold and successful rescue operation.

**SKORZENY CONTINUED TO** carry out special assignments during the war. During Hitler's last offensive in the Ardennes in 1944 he created chaos behind American lines. Skorzeny and his men were disguised as American soldiers. They spread false information and turned the road signs so that the US columns were disoriented. It caused confusion among the Americans, which delayed any opposition.

At one point, the Americans feared that Skorzeny and his men intended to kidnap Dwight D Eisenhower, the Allied commander. This led to the security at the general's headquarters being ramped up. But it turned out that the Allies overreacted and Skorzeny had no plans to carry out such an action.

By the end of April 1945 Berlin was falling. Hitler was still in his bunker in the city, which was attacked by the Russians from all sides. Skorzeny was ready with a plane so he could take Hitler to safety. But instead, Hitler ended up committing suicide, and Skorzeny ended up as a prisoner of war of the British and Americans.

After the war, Skorzeny was accused of war crimes, but he was eventually acquitted. He was still held captive in an "denazification" camp. From there he escaped to Argentina in 1948 where he worked for dictator Juan and his wife Evita Perón. He started a relationship with Evita, but when she died, he moved to General Franco's fascist Spain. From there he helped Nazis in other countries to live underground. In 1975, Skorzeny became ill and died in his own bed in Madrid. ★

**Morten Rendsmark** is a military historian.

**Further reading: Hitler's Raid to Save Mussolini** (2005) by Greg Annussek ★ **The Memoirs of the Most Dangerous Man in Europe** (1997) by Otto Skorzeny

Mussolini and his lover hang on an iron beam at a petrol station at Loreto Square in Milan.



TIME LIFE PICTURES/12TH COMBAT CAMERA GREN/HE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION/GETTY

## Italians strung up Mussolini

★ After his liberation from captivity, Mussolini was reinstated as a dictator. But by April 1945 it was all over. He was shot by partisans.

After the Germans freed Mussolini in September 1943, he again became a dictator in Italy. There he created a new fascist republic with the town of Salò as its capital. But in practice he was Hitler's puppet. In addition, he was a broken man and knew both that fascism in Italy was at an end while the war was lost. On 27th April, 1945, disguised as a German soldier, he tried to escape to neutral Switzerland. But Italian partisans discovered him and for the second time, the dictator was captured

by his own countrymen. This time they showed no mercy. Along with his mistress, Claretta Petacci, Mussolini was sentenced to death, and the couple was then shot.

On 29th April – the day before Hitler committed suicide in Berlin – Mussolini's dead body was strung up for public view in Loreto Square in Milan.

During the last two years of the war, Italy was a battlefield where the Allies slowly advanced throughout the country. The Germans took advantage of the mountains and the rivers to create defence lines, and the fighting stretched on and on. German troops only surrendered in May 1945.



# SS'S UGLY REPRISALS

Text:  
**ESKIL  
FAGERSTRÖM**

The bombing at Via Rasella in Rome in March 1944 was the most controversial chapter of the Italian partisan movement. While nearly 50 German soldiers were killed, the reprisals were terrible – 350 innocent Italians were executed.

BUNDESARCHIV, BILD 101-312-0983-10/KOCH/CC-BY-SA

**“BLOOD, BODY PARTS  
AND LIMBS WERE  
SPREAD THROUGHOUT  
VIA RASELLA”**

A dead German soldier is covered up after the attack. In total, 46 Germans from the SS Police Regiment Bozen were killed on Via Rasella in Rome.

Castel  
Sant'  
Angelo





The soldiers came from Via del Traforo.

German headquarters

Palazzo Barberini

Partisans' bomb explodes in the Via Rasella.

**R**osario Bentivegna, doctoral student and partisan from Rome, was responsible for the bomb. He packed it himself: 18 kilograms of explosives and a load of scrap iron was loaded on to a rubbish cart. Just before 14.00 the cart was in place on Via Rasella. It was close to Rome's political centre and the German occupation troops' headquarters on the parade Via Veneto.

The partisans hailed from Rome's communist resistance movement, *Gruppo d'Azione Patriotica* (GAP), and had planned a major attack on the German troops that had occupied Rome for the past six months. One of them, Mario Fiorentini, had noticed that a military police force marched along the narrow alley every day.



**Rosario Bentivegna was responsible for the bomb.**

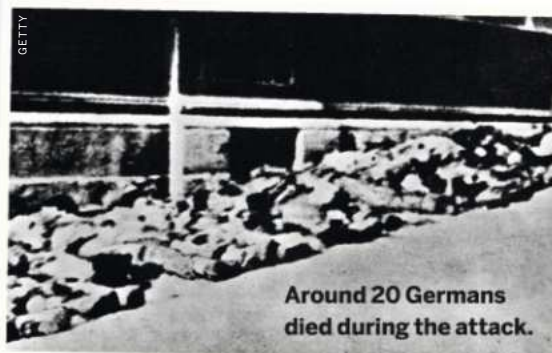
The soldiers belonged to the SS Police Regiment Bozen and used the street when returning to their barracks at the Palazzo del Viminale. They could hardly be called an elite force; they were recently conscripted middle-aged German-speaking Italians from South Tyrol. In Rome they were subject to SS command.

At the top of Via Quattro Fontane, near the magnificent Baroque Palazzo Barberini, there were no side streets leading to Via Rasella, which meant that the Germans would be caught in a trap.

**BENTIVEGNA CHAIN-SMOKED AS** he waited for the cart. In the side streets there were another 15 partisans ready. First the bomb would explode then the company would be attacked with grenades and machine guns.

But where were the soldiers? At 15.35 not a single German had appeared.

Eventually, the tramping of military boots and resounding voices from 156 men in uniform was ▶



**Around 20 Germans died during the attack.**



# The battle for Italy

## 10TH JULY, 1943:

Allied troops land in Sicily.

## 19TH JULY:

Rome is bombed. About 3,000 people die.

## 24TH-25TH JULY:

The Fascist Grand Council deposes Benito Mussolini. Field Marshal Pietro Badoglio is appointed new head of state.



**La Stampa**  
26th July,  
1943.

## 3RD SEPTEMBER:

Allied forces land on the Italian mainland. On the same day, a peace agreement is secretly negotiated between Badoglio's government and the Allies.

## 8TH SEPTEMBER:

the peace agreement is made public.

**The war has turned – Rome is bombed. The bomb camera from an Allied B-17 Flying Fortress shows how the bombs hit the capital on 19th July, 1943.**

► heard down the hill. When the column had reached about halfway, Bentivegna lit the fuse. Then he quickly walked the few steps up to Via Quattro Fontane, where his girlfriend Carla Capponi waited with a change of clothes for him.

**AT 15.47 THE** bomb exploded with a loud bang that could be heard throughout the city centre. Iron shrapnel flew through the air; plaster broke off the houses' walls. A water pipe split and water poured down the street. Blood, body parts and limbs were spread throughout Via Rasella. Seconds after the explosion, three partisans ran out of a side street, threw three hand grenades and then sprinted off. Other resistance fighters opened fire against the remains of the German column. It was a quick operation: after five minutes, the partisans had disappeared. On the street lay 26 dead and 60

injured German soldiers. Over the next few weeks an additional 20 would die from their injuries.

The Bozen regiment reacted in panic, running in all directions. Others began shooting wildly at the windows of the tall old houses facing the street – they thought they'd been attacked from above.

All the highest-ranking German officers had just celebrated the 25th anniversary of the Italian Fascist party in the dining rooms of the big hotel on Via Veneto, just a few hundred metres away. The generals and colonels rushed down to Via Rasella.

**MAJOR GENERAL KURT** Mälzer, military commander in Rome, had drunk a lot that day. When he saw the carnage, he began to scream in rage: "Revenge! Revenge!"

This triggered an impromptu clean-up response. German soldiers went from door to door. They





**9TH SEPTEMBER:**

German army surrounds Rome. The King, Queen and Badoglio escape from the city.

**10TH SEPTEMBER:**

A volunteer corps occupies positions near the old city wall south of the city centre. For a

couple of hours, they manage to hold off the advancing German infantry, but at 16.00, resistance is broken. 597 people are killed. Germany occupies Rome.

**16TH OCTOBER:**

Raids on Rome's Jews. 1,259 people, 10 percent of Rome's

Jewish population, are captured and deported to Auschwitz. Only 16 of them would return two years later.

**26TH OCTOBER:**

The first major partisan attack in central Rome. Barracks and guards are targeted.

## “[MÄLZER] BEGAN TO SCREAM IN RAGE: ‘REVENGE! REVENGE!’”

arrested everyone they could find and lined them up against a tall fence. Mälzer was an army officer directly under Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, commander of the German troops in Italy. However, the one who really had the power in occupied Rome was not Mälzer, but the head of the SS troops, SS-Obersturmbannführer Herbert Kappler.

Kappler also went to Via Rasella, where Mälzer granted him permission to take command. He halted the indiscriminate shooting, mistreatment and house searches. Those men arrested on the spot were held inside the basement of the interior ministry until further notice.

It was by far the biggest partisan attack in Italy – carried out in daylight in the centre of the city – and news quickly reached Germany and Adolf Hitler.

He gave orders to retaliate in the most brutal way: the whole area around Via Rasella would be burned and its residents executed. For each dead soldier – of which there were now 32 – between 30 and 50 Italian prisoners would die.

**BENITO MUSSOLINI HAD** governed Italy for over 20 years using a mix of rhetoric, terror and propaganda. But in 1943 his time in power was almost at an end. 200,000 Italians had already been killed in the Soviet Union, the Balkans and in North Africa. Another million were prisoners of war. The fact that the fortunes of war had definitely turned became even more apparent when the first Allied troops landed on Sicily on 10th July, 1943.

A week later, Rome was bombed – also clear evidence of the failure of the fascist's inability to defend the country, just like the Vatican's futile attempt to keep “The Eternal City” out of the war.

The targets for Allied air attacks were the railway stations. But the planes flew high to avoid Italian air defence and accuracy wasn't great. The train



**Major General Kurt Mälzer, commander of Rome.**



**Herbert Kappler, Head of SS forces in Rome.**

BUNDESARCHIV, BILD 101-311-0926-08 / FRASS/CC-BY-SA 3.0



**Soldiers belonging to the SS's police regiment had green uniforms instead of the characteristic grey ones. Poster from that time.**

station was hit, but so were the areas surrounding it. Thousands of civilians were killed and injured.

On 24th July, the Fascist Grand Council met for the first time in several years. On the table was a proposal to take command of the Italian forces from Mussolini – the motion was passed at the meeting.

**THE FOLLOWING DAY** the dictator was secretly taken to Ponza, an island off the east coast of Italy. The new commander-in-chief was Field Marshal Pietro Badoglio. But the political situation was unstable. In the south, Allied troops advanced. The Germans remained in the north. In the middle, Badoglio's was both a military and morally weak regime and included the now-compromised and unpopular royal house. Badoglio quickly contacted the Allies and on 8th September, a ceasefire agreement was announced.

The city was now completely open. Would the Allies take Rome? In the absence of any Allied ►



## 17TH DECEMBER:

A partisan offensive is launched against German targets in Rome. An officer is shot and 16 German soldiers are killed.

## 19TH DECEMBER:

A bold attack is made on the Grand Hotel Flora, on Rome's Via

Veneto, which houses German military commanders and is therefore strictly guarded. Four GAP partisans (including one woman) managed to get past the barriers. Two bombs explode and destroy most of the first floor of the hotel, killing several Germans.



**Partisans' political branch symbol:**  
**Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale.**

## 28TH DECEMBER:

12 German soldiers die when Rome's city prison is bombed. Imprisoned partisans cheer.

## 22 JANUARY, 1944:

The Allies land troops along the coast of Anzio and Nettuno south-east of Rome.



**Partisans often used nail mats that would puncture German car tyres.**

► advance, Kesselring acted instead. On the evening of 8th September, Germans surrounded the city. Early in the morning of 9th September, Badoglio and the royal house fled from the city on the last open road east over the mountains.

In Rome, a provisional resistance movement gathered. They had the city to themselves for a day until – after a short hesitation – German soldiers advanced up Via Appia on 10th September and crushed the quickly mobilised volunteer defence.

The autumn and spring of 1943-44 were dark times for Rome. The city lacked food and water, it was forbidden to ride a bike, send telegraphs and make calls outside the city. No one was allowed to leave the city, stay with friends and – of course –

listen to Allied radio broadcasts or hide refugees. On 16th October, a major raid was conducted in Rome's Jewish ghetto. 1,259 Jews were arrested put on trains and sent to Auschwitz. Only 16 survived.

**IN THE AUTUMN** of 1943, a resistance movement began to take shape in Rome. Communists in *Bandiera Rossa* (Red Flag) were strongest. The partisans' plan was to make the city centre unsafe, which would force the Germans to relay all troops and transport to the city's outskirts, where they would be an easy target for both Allied air strikes and partisan raids.

One of the most common – and effective – attacks was carried out with strong nail mats.



BUNDESARCHIV, BILD 101-312-0983-05/KOCH/CC-BY-SA 3.0

German soldiers and Italian collaborators round up civilians in front of Palazzo Barberini after the attack. Many of the civilians were later murdered in the quarry at Fosse Ardeatine.



### 23RD MARCH:

The bomb attack on Via Rasella. Around 30 German soldiers die immediately.

### 24TH MARCH:

Massacre in Fosse Ardeatine. 335 Italian prisoners are arrested by Rome's SS forces.

A SdKfz 7 Zugkraftwagen with 3.7-cm FlaK36 in Rome in 1944.



### 23RD MAY:

Operation Diadem: Allied forces break out of the beachhead in Anzio and head to Rome, about 50 kilometres away.

### 4TH JUNE:

US troops under General Clark liberate Rome.

When German trucks drove over them, the tyres were punctured and entire convoys were forced to stop. While stationary, they could be attacked by coordinated Allied aircraft raids.

In the centre, German barracks and guards were attacked. During the Christmas season, activity escalated with a series of minor attacks around Via Veneto, an important symbolic centre for the German administration of the city.

**HITLER'S INITIAL ORDER** had called for 50 Italians to be killed for each German following the bomb. But by the time the final order was issued on 23rd March, the quota had been reduced: now it would be 10 Italians for each dead German soldier.

## "GERMAN BARRACKS AND GUARDS ARE TARGETED"

The SS garrison had just one day to execute the order. In SS headquarters, Kappler worked through the night completing his death list; a list that had now grown to 320 people, since a further four German soldiers had died from their injuries.

A handful of those already convicted were placed at the top. Ten more were selected from the people picked out randomly along Via Rasella. 16 were collected from detainees in other city prisons. 57 arrested Jews were also in prison – all were added ►



A German truck heads into the famous castle of Castel Sant'Angelo during the occupation.

### "I wept as I slowly pedalled home"

"We students, had never done anything more than provide superficial medication – and none of us had seen war – but now we underwent a baptism by fire. At first all we did was clean the wounds for treatment by the doctors, but the number of injured was soon overwhelming and we had to begin to do surgery ourselves... Within a short while we were working up to our ankles in rubble, torn clothing and blood. We worked through that day and night and on through the next. Only at sundown of the second day did I leave, bicycling through the completely levelled streets of San Lorenzo.

"It was a turning point in my life. I had seen the most hideous part of a lost war: the slaughter of the innocents. I wept as I slowly pedalled home. I felt something well within me that I had never felt before, an anger against those who had brought my country and my city to ruin – and a burning passion to make them pay."

**Rosario Bentivegna**, partisan, about his experiences during the bombing of Rome in the summer of 1943. Bentivegna led the attacks on Via Rasella.





US soldiers on Sherman tanks and jeeps roll into Rome on 4th June, 1944.

ROGER WOLLETT/GETTY

► to the list. A request led to more being provided from the fascist civilian police in Rome along with Pietro Koch, the head of a feared paramilitary fascist militia who hunted down resistance fighters and US agents.

Early in the morning of 24th March, the day after the attack, the list was ready: serious offenders, civilians, petty criminals and Jews aged between 15 to 70, from all social classes.

One thing they had in common was that they were innocent when it came to the attack at Via Rasella.

Although Kappler had served five years in the SS, he had never killed anyone before. In the morning he told his subordinates about the task that awaited them. Everyone had to participate, including the officers. It would not be “good for morale” if they didn’t, Kappler explained. None of them refused and no one protested.

**A COUPLE OF** weeks earlier, an informer tipped off the Germans that Italian army vehicles were hidden in an old quarry a few kilometres south of the city centre, on one of the old roads to the coast, Via Ardeatine. One of Kappler’s men proposed the quarry: an isolated spot with a grave that could be sealed off after the job was done.

Around 15.30 on 24th March, a dozen lorries with their prisoners rolled into the old quarry. Two by two, hands tied behind their backs, they climbed down into the tunnel system where they were forced onto their knees and shot in the head. After

## “NEW PRISONERS WERE FORCED TO CLIMB OVER THE DEAD BODIES.”

a while, the tunnels started to fill and new prisoners were forced to climb over the dead bodies. Some SS men refused to shoot, but, as Kappler later testified in the war trial, he provided “fatherly support” so the men could fulfil their duty. Bottles of brandy were passed around.

At 20.00, after five hours of killing, 335 people had died in the tunnels.



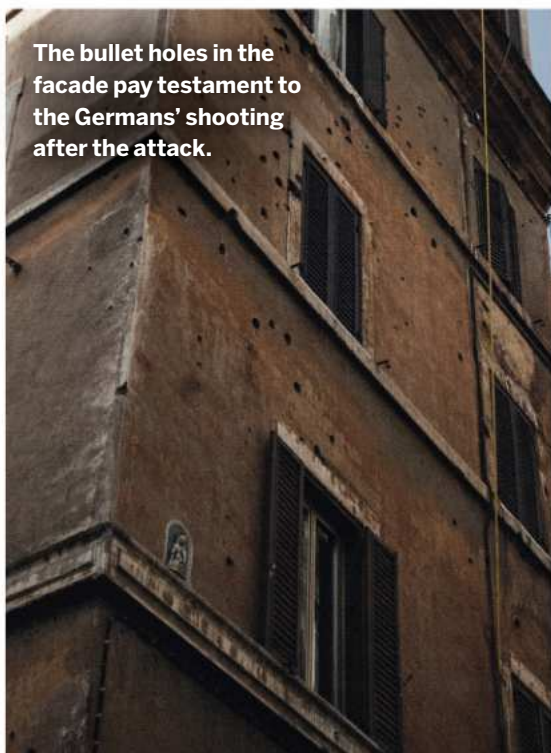
**Michele Di Verol was 15 years when he was killed.**

**THE FOLLOWING DAY**, the newspapers in Rome published a press release from the state-owned news agency. It was told that “Badoglio communist elements” had attacked and killed 32 German soldiers on Via Rasella and that an investigation had been initiated to find the culprits.

“Nobody shall sabotage unpunished the renewed Italo-German cooperation. The German command therefore, has given orders that for every dead German, ten Badoglio-Communists shall be shot. The order has already been carried out.”

In Rome, distress and terror increased during the spring of 1944. A lack of bread led to riots. Several resistance fighters and political opponents were taken, torture continued unabated and more and more people were killed. Rumours began to circulate about the terrible thing that had happened in the quarry at Via Ardeatine. In late





The bullet holes in the facade pay testament to the Germans' shooting after the attack.

ESKIL FAGERSTRÖM



Attorney General Attilio Ascarelli led the work to identify the bodies.



Today Fosse Ardeatine, the old quarry where the massacre was carried out, is a memorial.

ESKIL FAGERSTRÖM

winter, the Italian front between the Allies and Germans was at a standstill. Finally, on 11th May an offensive began from the south with the start of Operation Diadem. On 18th May, Monte Cassino was taken. It took the lives of just over 50,000 Allied and 20,000 German soldiers.

Early on 23rd May, 1944 almost 1,500 heavy artillery guns were fired at the front south of Rome. At the same time, bombers attacked Kesselring's headquarters and German fortifications along the Gustav line, which crossed Italy.

**ON THE SAME** day, troops finally broke out of Anzio, where 130,000 Allied soldiers had been trapped for several months. The last days of May and early days of June saw small towns on the plain south of Rome fall, one by one. On 4th June, the US, British and French flags were hoisted on Capitoline Hill: Rome had been liberated.

Rosario Bentivegna, commander of the attack on Via Rasella, was back in the city for the first time in several months. After the attack he had fought with partisans in the mountains, but now he would help resistance fighters oversee the German retreat.

An increasing number of Rome's population travelled to Fosse Ardeatine, a few miles south of the city centre, to mourn their dead who lay buried under the sand.

In the summer heat of 1944, work started to dig out the buried tunnels and autopsy the bodies from the massacre. Decomposition was already well underway, and many bodies had their heads shot

off. After being carried out, attorney general Attilio Ascarelli managed to identify 320 out of 335 victims.

**THE ATTACK ON** Via Rasella and the massacre of Fosse Ardeatine continued to characterise Italian post-war history. Some believe that the partisans had a share of the responsibility for the brutal reprisal killings. They should have realised that the Germans' revenge would be cruel. And could the massacre of innocents have been avoided if they had surrendered themselves to the occupying power?

The Communist Party and partisan groups have always defended the attack. Those on the right, however, have always regarded Via Rasella as an act of pure terrorism.

It's a strange and somewhat unpleasant experience to go up Via Rasella today. Some of the buildings still house the bullet holes following the German shooting. The street is also unusually empty of restaurants, cafés or shops. It may be just a coincidence – but for many of Rome's population the place has emotional significance. It's a place of murder.

Fosse Ardeatine became a national monument long ago: a large sandy area that has been excavated along its sides. Inside a light burns and it's cold and damp underground. A memorial plaque honours attorney Attilio Ascarelli alongside the victims – *martyrene*, in Italian – who have been laid to rest under the large public monument. 🇮🇹

**Eskil Fagerström** is a journalist and author.



**Further reading:**  
**The Order Has Been Carried Out** (1976) by Alessandro Portelli ★  
**The Battle for Rome** (2010) by Robert Katz ★  
**A Civil War: A History of the Italian Resistance** (2014) by Claudio Pavone.



# TEENAGE ARMY

On D-Day 16,000 Hitler Youth were put into battle against invasion forces. The boys had sworn that they would fight to the last man and were assigned to defend the city of Caen. Allied plans anticipated the city being taken on day one – the boys held out for 33.

Text: **ELSE CHRISTENSEN**

A very young German soldier from the 12th SS Panzer Division "Hitlerjugend" in Normandy on 28th July, 1944. His hands rest on an MG 42 machine gun.





# HELD CAEN

**“T**ake cover!” The cry rang out across the field as the planes approached at low altitude.

It had begun: the Allies had arrived and fighting could begin. 17-year-old SS-Sturmmann Hellmuth Pock looked up at the planes just over his head. When he saw the German markings, he threw up his arms waving. The others followed shouting “bravo” and “heil”.

The pilots responded by tilting their wings. The power and determination inspired the young men

on the ground, who were all convinced that they would be able to repel the Allied invasion.

The mist lay like a thin grey carpet over the green hills of Normandy when Pock and his comrades drove out to the coast on the morning of 6th June, 1944. The 12th SS Panzer Division “Hitlerjugend”, which included officers and NCOs, consisted of ►

**“THE 12TH SS PANZER DIVISION... WERE ABOUT TO FACE THEIR BAPTISM OF FIRE.”**



ULLSTEIN/GETTY

Mechanised SS Infantry near Caen in July 1944, one month after the Allies' invasion of Normandy.



A delegation from the SS division Großdeutschland visits a military training camp. In the middle stands Colonel Horst Niemack talking to some recruits from the Hitlerjugend division.



GETTY IMAGES

- ▶ 20,540 men, 148 tanks and 333 other vehicles were now about to face their baptism of fire.

The soldiers were enthused at the thought of thundering over the fields and pushing the enemy back into the sea. They remained happily ignorant of what lay ahead and why their division had been created in the first place.



The division's emblem is a single S-rune and Hitler Youth's symbol is a key.

**SINCE THE DEFEAT** at Stalingrad the year before, the German army lacked men, and its fighting spirit had begun to wane. The military leadership expected an Allied invasion in France, but they could not divert troops from the hard-pressed Eastern Front. The solution, proposed by the SS and quickly approved by Hitler, was to create a completely new SS division of volunteer boys born in 1926 from the Hitler Youth: a small army of 17 year olds. Thanks to their ideological training in the Nazi youth organisation, Germany could expect a division of highly motivated young people ready to sacrifice themselves for their country – role models and cannon fodder rolled into one.

German troops poured in from all directions; whether in armoured troop transport, lorries or motorcycles, they all headed towards the coast at high speed. Not a single enemy plane was in sight.

The task of the *Hitlerjugend* (Hitler Youth) division was primarily to defend the city of Caen, which lay 1.4 miles from the invasion beaches, and

which formed a strategically important hub with many major roads leading to the rest of France. It would not be that difficult a task because the German forces were completely superior to the Allies – or so the youngsters had heard.

Suddenly Pock was struck by a thought: the fighting might already be over before they arrived. Imagine if everything was already over! He could hardly bear the thought.

At a junction, Pock's unit broke past one of the other columns in the division. Eyes wide, Pock



BUNDESARCHIV

**Grenadiers from the 12th SS Panzer Division "Hitlerjugend" line up after being awarded the Iron Cross in July 1944.**



## “GERMAN TROOPS POURED IN FROM ALL DIRECTIONS”

followed the camouflaged vehicles that passed in front of him like rolling bushes. Under the steel helmets, the young faces shone with expectation and confidence. “Good luck, Comrades!” cried Pock and waved as the last vehicles drove past. When his own vehicle was moving again, it was almost as if he could feel the victory that was waiting somewhere in front of him – beyond the next horizon filled with wafting pale yellow corn.

**AT NOON THEY** met a completely different kind of column. Pock and his comrades surveyed the scattered scrap at the roadside in disbelief while trying to figure out what kind of vehicles the huge steel skeletons had once belonged to. Shells and spent bullets lay scattered on the ground between the bodies of German soldiers who had been blown to pieces beyond recognition. Allied fighter bombers had turned up with devastating power.

The tailgate was open on one of the armoured cars, and Pock saw the legs and lower body of a soldier sticking out. Pock could see that his entire upper body had been burned to nothing. As the horrific sight struck him, Pock hoped that the soldier had been killed by a bullet before the flames had engulfed him.

A little further along, he heard the sound of planes and in the next second a whole swarm flew over them. The enemy! Pock and his comrades opened fire with their weapons. Nothing happened. Pock was surprised how the aircraft just carried on. There wasn't a single smoky streak in the sky that could give hope that their bullets had made any impact.

“These damned dogs don't notice anything at all”, exclaimed one of the soldiers reportedly when the planes vanished over the horizon.

At 19 years old Alois Morawetz was the youngest Panther commander in the 3rd Company. For two days, his tanks had stealthily crossed the landscape to avoid being seen by enemy aircraft. Since the invasion three days earlier, the Allies had moved quickly and occupied several small towns west of Caen. Contrary to what the youths had first thought, the Luftwaffe was in a pitiful state and had failed to provide support for troops on the ground. Nevertheless, Morawetz seemed to be lucky: even though his unit had been shot at, no one was injured.

Now he was driving to Norrey, one of the small towns that the division would recapture from the Allies. As the column of tanks approached the



D-Day is history's greatest landing operation.

## The final game is on

★ After the successful invasion on D-Day, German defeat was inevitable, but the war continued as per Adolf Hitler's orders.

Just after midnight on 6th June, 1944, British gliders began flying across the Normandy coast. After landing, the soldiers took control of the bridges in the area. This was followed by a swarm of paratroopers. In the grey morning mist heavy naval artillery began to roar as Allied warships began systematically bombing the German coastal fortifications.

At 06.30 the landing began. Soldiers rolled onto the beaches and tanks thundered through the sandbanks. The noise from the planes filled the air and was only drowned out by the rumbling of 13,000 bombs dropped over the coastal area.

The Allies were sole lords of the air. Over 150,000 soldiers – Americans, British and Canadians – and almost 30,000 vehicles were landed on D-Day itself. The fleet that had transported them over the channel consisted of about 5,000 vessels.







**Hitlerjugend division attempts more attacks against the Allies but resistance is too strong.**

► town, Morawetz stayed close to a railway line. In his headphones he heard his company's code word: "*Watesaal*" (waiting room) followed by the order, "Swing to the left." Morawetz confirmed, relaying the order by radio to his tanks and swinging away from the railway line. From the tank's turret he looked over fields and meadows. The sun was high in the sky and everything looked strangely peaceful. Morawetz crept into his combat position in the turret and closed the hatch.

**THE EXPLOSION WAS** huge. The entire tank shook as it had been hit by a giant sledgehammer and then stood still. Fortunately, Morawetz realised that the tank was on fire. He heard a crackling sound. The fire had taken hold in the machine gun ammunition. He tried to push up the turret's hatch, but it was stuck. In the semi-darkness he shouted at the gunner and the driver, but there was clearly no one else alive in the burning tank.

Morawetz pushed his hands against the hatch, but it was impossible to move the massive steel

lid. Under him the flames began to lick against the turret. Desperately he fought with the hatch, which suddenly yielded and opened. Light poured in, followed by a loud noise from exploding shells – hostile artillery being fired at them. Morawetz jumped from the tank and ran a few metres. He fell and then everything went black.

When he came to, he was surrounded by burning German tanks. He managed to get up and stagger on unsteady feet to a medic standing by a motorcycle with sidecar a hundred metres away. Morawetz looked around. Soldiers with scorched uniforms and burned faces approached from all sides. Bullets whizzed past the ears of the wounded.

The medic waved Morawetz into the sidecar, and then drove off at a furious speed. Morawetz's luck had held.

The hopeless counterattack that Morawetz's unit had participated in had cost the Germans dearly. They did everything possible to protect the remaining tanks.

In the middle of the night, Hellmuth Pock was sent out to repair a tank whose steering had been damaged. The air inside the tank was still warm following the long hot day. In the dark he reached out for something to hold and became confused when his hands gripped a sticky substance.

"Our commander was killed in action. His head was ripped off... The whole interior is a mess", said the tank's gunner apologetically.

"It's alright. There's nothing you can do", replied Pock. He didn't know what else to say. Quietly, he tried to wipe his hands on the inside of the Panzer. Outside shells were still flying around close by.

**AFTER FIVE DAYS** of fighting, the Germans were forced back. The Allies were far too superior. The defence line in front of Caen still held, but the troops were exhausted. Because of the Allies' supremacy in the air, armoured reinforcements had trouble getting forward.

North of the Seine lay the 15th Army with fresh infantry divisions, but Hitler refused to put them into battle. The dictator was convinced that D-Day was simply a diversion for another larger invasion, and he would not waste resources on the forces needed in Caen. The 15th Army had to be saved for the real attack.

The Führer's decision sealed the fate of the Hitlerjugend division. The soldiers dug themselves in and prepared to defend Caen to the last man. Shallow trenches were replaced with fortified positions reinforced by railroad sleepers. Despite almost uninterrupted Allied attacks, the young troops fought to hold their positions.

The German field hospitals were soon full of the wounded and dying. Friedrich Zistler, a medical



## **“I CAN’T DO ANY MORE. THE LOSSES ARE TOO HIGH. IT’S A BLOODY MESS.”**

officer in the Panzer-Pionier-Bataillon had been injured and lay next to a Hitler Youth soldier. The young man had been given morphine and was barely conscious, but occasionally he would groan in pain and mumble something incomprehensible. The doctor was also anaesthetised with morphine, but suddenly he heard the soldier say loud and clear:

“Mother, mother, but I mean Germany.”

Before the doctor slipped back into a morphine fog, he wondered what the young soldier meant. When he woke up again, the boy was dead.

SS-Untersturmführer Karl-Heinz Gauch started his motorcycle and drove out into the countryside. Along the way, telephone lines had collapsed between bomb craters and shell holes. In the meadows, dead cows lay everywhere, bloated and stinking in the sunshine. He drove through a town that was almost completely deserted. The few people he saw crept around like ghosts trying to hide from the living.

**IT WAS 25TH** June and Caen remained in German hands. But around it, one town after another fell to the Allies, and the German defences began to waver. Gauch had been sent to look for a battalion that staff had not been able to contact. It should be at the front about a mile outside Caen. Gauch had marked the command post’s position on a detailed map.

When Gauch was almost there, he was suddenly fired upon. He braked, abandoned the motorcycle and ran on as he sought cover wherever possible.

The command post was an earth bunker with a deep hole at the entrance. When Gauch threw himself inside with a thud, the air pressure snuffed



SÜDDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG/IBA

out the only lit candle in the post. Someone swore quietly in the dark, a match was lit and soon light shone again. Breathless, but eager, Gauch called out his name and rank: “I request your present situation. Why is there no contact with the Division?” He could barely breathe. He caught his breath as he looked at the officers around him.

The men were unshaven and dirty and in the dark their eyes were sunk deep in their sockets. The duty officer, a pale man with coal-black hair, took both of Gauch’s hands and looked earnestly at him.

“The situation? Tell Gerd he must help us under all circumstances. Tell him we are in very bad shape. I can barely hold on. I had to withdraw the left wing to here an hour ago.” ▶

**Ammunition bearers from the 12th SS Panzer Division “Hitlerjugend” in mid-June 1944.**

**The Panzer Division was declared combat-ready on 1st June, 1944. It included 148 tanks.**



BUNDESARCHIV



# The youth elite troops

★ After the defence of Caen, the 12th SS Panzer Division "Hitlerjugend" was used as an elite force and inserted where the fighting was hardest.

The defeat in Caen did not mean that the war was over for young soldiers. Army High Command considered the division to be an elite body that could be put into particularly difficult situations. This happened just after the battle of Caen.

The division made a particularly remarkable contribution to the so-called Falaise Pocket, where

large German forces were close to being surrounded. The division opened a corridor in the pocket allowing thousands of German soldiers to escape before the Allies closed the gap and began a devastating bombardment with artillery and bombers.

But hundreds of soldiers from the Hitlerjugend division were caught at Falaise. When the battle of Normandy ended in August, it had lost 8,000 men.

It later participated in the failed Ardennes Offensive, and in the hopeless attempt to liberate

Hungary's capital, Budapest, from the Russians. Then, like the other German troops on the Eastern Front, the division was forced to retreat from the Red Army forces.

On 8th May, 1945, the day the war ended in Europe, the last soldiers in the division ran as fast as they could westward and surrendered to US troops. Hitlerjugend division's commander Kurt Meyer was sentenced to ten years in prison after being convicted for serious war crimes.



**Armband used by soldiers in the division.**



**Two soldiers from the 12th SS Panzer Division "Hitlerjugend" at a castle outside Caen. The division fought all the way through to Germany's final surrender on 8th May, 1945.**





Child soldiers from the Hitlerjugend division take care of a colleague who is injured in the fighting in Normandy. The picture was taken on 18th August, 1944.

- The officer brought out a map and showed where the cave lay in the German lines.

"I can't do any more. The losses are too high. It's a bloody mess."

He sounded hurried and breathless. Occasionally the candle fluttered after an explosion. The reports started to conflict: "Shortage of ammunition", "Chief wounded", "One Panzer knocked out".

One of the calls prompted the black-haired officer to reach for the field phone.

"Hold positions, hold them under all circumstances!" He roared into the telephone. His voice broke. Gauch had seen enough and stood up to go.

"Don't forget anything, Gauch. Don't forget us", was the officer's plea.

**THE NEXT DAY** the battalion was forced back from its position. The Allies knew that Hitler had finally agreed to send reinforcements to the area and that a few powerful armoured divisions were on their way. Therefore, they put every effort into taking Caen before reinforcements arrived. What Gauch had witnessed was just the result of the preliminary manoeuvres before a major Allied offensive.

Hundreds of Sherman tanks rolled slowly forward. The Allied offensive codenamed Epsom was in full swing, and the tanks destroyed everything that crossed their path. When the Allies reached the

**"GIVE MY LOVE TO MY WIFE... AND THE LITTLE ONE... TAKE CARE OF THEM. AND DO NOT BE SAD. THERE IS NOTHING SAD..."**

town of Saint-Manvieu, the Germans knew the situation was critical. If the tanks were to pass through the town park where the Germans had their command post, they would be able to capture an intact bridge and roll straight out on the road to Caen. It would have been a disaster.

In the park the Germans collected everything ounce of strength they could muster. Even non-combatants – messengers, clerks and orderlies – took up position among the trees when the first Sherman tank rolled toward the entrance to the park – and halted.

"That tank has to go!" the commander pointed towards a flamethrower tank.

**EMIL DÜRR**, a 24-year-old *unterscharführer* (junior squad commander) in the Hitlerjugend division, heard the order but did not send his men. He took responsibility himself. Suddenly, he ran with a Panzerfaust and headed for the tank. He fired the weapon, but the tank's armour held firm.

At the same moment, Dürr was hit in the chest by a bullet from a machine gun. He ignored the pain ►



WAFENSS

**Emil Dürr died from his injuries after he had knocked out a tank.**





ULSTEIN/GETTY

Some young grenadiers from the 12th SS Panzer Division "Hitlerjugend" are rewarded with the Iron Cross after their efforts at Caen.

► and ran back to get a new Panzerfaust. This time he took aim at the tracks. They were destroyed by the explosion. The tank was stopped, but it was not disarmed. Then came another round of volleys and Dürr's legs were swept from under him. Despite this, he crawled back to the trenches where he found a magnetic mine and took it with him.

"You are bleeding," someone called to him, but Dürr did not care. He stumbled against the tank as bullets whizzed around his ears. He reached the tank and fastened the mine to the hood. Then he wandered back. The mine exploded with a loud bang, and the tank disappeared completely. It was disarmed. With his last strength, Dürr dragged himself to his post where a couple of soldiers grabbed him and helped him to lie down. Blood gushed from both his chest and legs, but he was conscious and lucid. He asked for a cigarette and something to rest his head against. He got a gas mask, the only one that worked. Quietly, he smoked his cigarette as he grasped a tuft of grass with his other hand.

"You must not let them get into the park", he said to the boys. "Give my love to my wife... and the little

one... Take care of them. And do not be sad. There is nothing sad." The cigarette fell out of his hand before his chest rose and fell one last time. Now the others were left to take care of the remaining tanks.

German reinforcements came on 28th June, but then it was already too late. The carnage moved inexorably closer to Caen.

**ON THE EVENING** of 7th July, Leo Freund and his comrades had sought refuge in a tunnel in a quarry just outside the city. There was the dull thud of Allied bombs, and the roof over them shook disturbingly. As Freund weighted up the pros and cons of leaving the tunnel, a bomb dropped outside.

It triggered a landslide that blocked the entrance. They were buried alive in an impenetrable, stifling darkness. One of the men started screaming, but another took command and managed to soothe frayed nerves. He explained calmly and sensibly to the other soldiers that they would have to take turns digging. Those who weren't working had to remain quiet to save the oxygen as best they could.

Freund lay quietly on the cold rocks. All perception of time and space had been lost in the



dark. He was convinced that none of them would survive. Then suddenly he heard a cry: "Light!"

Blessed fresh air poured in through the opening. While the soldiers took deep breaths, they heard someone high above shouting their names. Helping hands pulled them up one by one. Freund knew his emotions were running high. He laughed and cried while embracing his comrades.

For a month, the Allies vainly attempted to take Caen. For the sake of the civilian population, high command had refrained from bombing the city, but on 7th July, their patience ran out and the Allies took off the silk gloves. 467 heavy bombers dropped 2,500 tonnes of bombs over Caen. 3,000 French civilians and a smaller – but unknown number – of Germans were killed. On 8th July, Allied ground forces attacked the city again.

The next day, Hitlerjugend division's commander, SS-Brigadeführer Kurt Meyer, pulled his last troops away from the centre. In a fortified position in one of Caen's suburbs, he found some of his soldiers – they were fast asleep.

The faces under the dirty steel helmets looked wiped out. They appeared older and more ravaged than they should in view of the boys' ages. The soldiers were so tired that he had to shake each one to rouse them. For several weeks they had fought without rest and were totally exhausted. But they followed orders. Groggily, they got to their feet and started walking. Faltering and sleepily they passed through Caen's ruins and left the city.

The quarry where Leo Freund found himself was one of Hitlerjugend division's rear positions. The unit's mission was to cover the retreat. Everyone knew that Allied soldiers could come at any time and the atmosphere was tense.

**ONE OF THE** group officers – Richter – called Freund and announced his belief he was going to die that day. He asked Freund to make sure his personal belongings were sent to his family. Freund waved him away and said he would ask Richter to do the same if he himself was killed. They separated with a cheerful comment that they would see who was hit first.

When artillery shells began to fall around them, Freund ran to his own position and told his comrades about Richter's gloomy prediction. Before he had finished telling the story, a soldier came running over and threw himself down on the ground. He said that Richter had been killed. Freund climbed up from the trench, ran back to the place where he had just talked with Richter and found him dead.

Freund had only one thought in his mind: he had to give Richter a proper funeral. A couple of comrades helped him carry the body further into the quarry while hearing the cries: "The enemy is coming! The

## **"EVERY SECOND THEY WAITED TO HEAR GUNFIRE AND FEEL THE BULLETS BORE INTO THEIR FLESH"**

enemy is coming!" The boys exchanged glances and then began to dig into the hard, rocky ground. They had laid down both helmets and weapons so they could dig, and they were preoccupied. Suddenly Freund stiffened. Something was wrong. He turned and saw several rifle barrels pointing toward him and his two colleagues. A group of Brits stood around 20 yards from them, motionless and tense, ready to shoot.

**TOGETHER, FREUND AND** the others continued to bury their dead comrade. Every second they waited to hear gunfire and feel the bullets bore into their flesh. They would also die today – of that they were absolutely sure.

The work took time, but eventually they could place Richter's body in the shallow grave. On the grave they made a small mound and then tied together two twigs into a cross, which they stuck between the rocks. They folded their hands and prayed together. Then they looked up. They had done what they were supposed to do. Now it came.

The Brits were still ready to shoot, but they did not. They could have killed the boys a long time ago, but they were clearly touched by the scene they witnessed.

Very slowly, Freund bent down to pick up his helmet and gun. Then he went with the two other boys towards the edge of the quarry without daring to look back at the British soldiers. Once they had left, the three boys ran as fast as they could. Beyond lay the road – the same road as the remaining 12th SS Panzer Division "Hitlerjugend" had just taken.

Leo Freund survived the war as did Hellmuth Pock, Karl-Heinz Gauch and Alois Morawetz. They sent their stories to one of their former officers, Hubert Meyer, who collated them in a book about the SS (See Further Reading box). 🇩🇪

**Else Christensen** is a military historian.



**Propaganda Poster, illustrating the heroic dream of youth who had never experienced anything but Nazism.**

**Further reading:** *Blood and Honor: The History of the 12th SS Panzer Division, "Hitler Youth", 1943-1945* (1987) by Craig W H. Luther ★ *The 12th SS. The History of the Hitler Youth Panzer Division: Volume One* (2005) by Hubert Meyer



ULLSTEIN BILD / IBL

The 30-year-old SS officer tackled one of the war's most one-sided battles in June 1944 – his Tiger unit took on an entire British tank division – and won.

# TIGER ACE





**Wittmann** preferred to keep the hatch open for a better overview.

**80-mm side armour** provided such good protection that most guns could only penetrate it from close range.

**Machine guns** were often used to strafe the terrain in front where the enemy might be lying in ambush.

**The 88-mm gun** could break through the armour of any enemy tank.

**100-mm front armour** made it almost invulnerable to frontal attacks.

**72.5-cm caterpillars** spread the weight evenly so the Tiger didn't sink in soft ground.

The Normandy landings in 1944 marked the beginning of the end for the Germans on the Western Front. But at Villers-Bocage, panzer commander Michael Wittmann managed to take the British by surprise and demonstrate it wouldn't be plain sailing for the Allies.

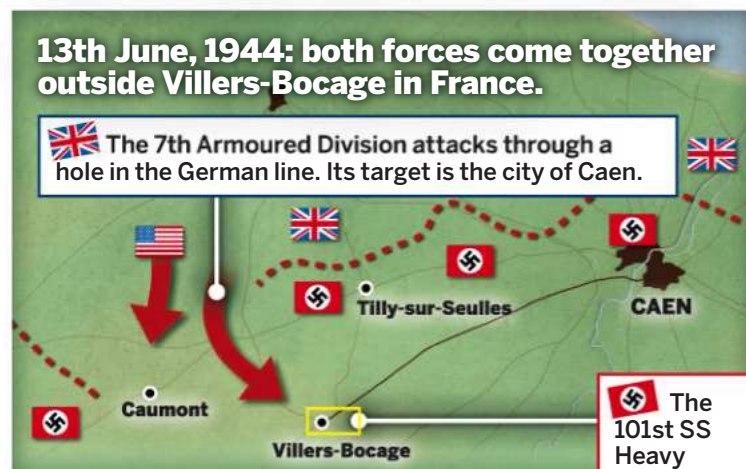


S S panzer commander Michael Wittmann pored over the map in front of him. On a June day in 1944 he was attempting to get an overview of the situation at the front in northern France, when one of his men suddenly rushed through the door.

“Obersturmführer, tanks are driving past outside”, the SS soldier said excitedly. “They’re a peculiar round shape and I don’t think they’re German.”

Any hope of a quiet morning was shattered. Wittmann ran through the bushes to peer on to the N175 highway. Hidden in the bushes he watched as an endless array of armoured vehicles rolled past. They were British.

The officer turned on his heels and ran back to his own tanks that were camouflaged in a sunken lane. Normally Wittmann would have been able to call on 14 powerful Tiger tanks, but he only had four left. The rest had been abandoned on the long road from Paris due to engine problems or gearbox failure. What was left of Wittmann’s unit was minuscule compared to the British. They were rested and



**13th June, 1944: both forces come together outside Villers-Bocage in France.**

The 7th Armoured Division attacks through a hole in the German line. Its target is the city of Caen.

The 101st SS Heavy Panzer Battalion is the only German reserve force in place at Villers-Bocage.

repaired, but despite being hopelessly outnumbered they couldn’t let the British continue unhindered along the main road and past German lines.

The tank commander barked out several orders and his experienced soldiers responded immediately. One after another, the Tigers’ engines roared into

# 1 British advanced unawares

On 13th June, 1944 an entire British armoured division rolled through Villers-Bocage in Normandy. At the same time four German Tiger tanks were recuperating nearby. SS panzer commander Michael Wittmann decided to take on the entire enemy alone.

The British column consisted of more than 20 vehicles



**Sherman Firefly**  
**76.2-mm gun**  
Firefly was the only British tank that could beat the German Tiger in a frontal assault. It was a US Sherman fitted with a powerful 17-pounder anti-tank gun.

**Cromwell**  
**75-mm gun**  
The British Cromwell tank was fast, with a maximum speed of just over 60 km/h. But its weak armour and inadequate gun meant it required support from Fireflies.

**Stuart**  
**37-mm gun**  
The US M3 Stuart light tank was unsuited for tank-to-tank battle. It was primarily used for scouting.

**Sherman RA**  
**No armament**  
Artillery observers needed space for maps. The gun was removed, and a painted wooden rod was attached in its place to deceive the enemy.

**M5 Half-track**  
**12.7-mm machine gun**  
The US half-track vehicle could carry nine British soldiers. Its armour was only 8 mm thick and couldn’t offer sufficient protection against guns.

**Humber Scout Car**  
**No armament**  
The small British car was used as a fast means of transport by senior officers and recon units.

**6-pounder**  
**57-mm gun**  
It was small and easily to transport, so the British continued to use the gun even though larger and more powerful weapons were available.

**Loyd Carrier**  
**No armament**  
The small tracked vehicle transported 6-pounder anti-tank guns and their ammunition.

Inside the town a Firefly lay in wait. Several tanks were on their way.

A reconnaissance squad, artillery observers and regiment command stood at the town limits. They possessed three Stuarts, five Cromwells and a Sherman RA.



life. Wittmann's own tank had failed to complete the journey from Paris, so he took command of another. It rolled 20 metres, then the engine died. Wittmann climbed out, then ran cursing to another Tiger with number 222 on its back and climbed onboard. Its own commander was ordered to leave. Within seconds the tank was ready to attack with Wittmann commanding from its turret.

**WHEN THE GERMANS** struck, all traffic on the N175 had stopped. The British vanguard was investigating the terrain further ahead, and behind it a long line of tanks and armoured vehicles sat waiting.

Like the Germans, the British had also enjoyed a relatively leisurely morning. It was 13th June, 1944, one week after D-Day, and now a tank division had moved through a hole in the German defence lines. Their idyll was broken when Wittmann fired off his first shot and destroyed a British Cromwell tank that hadn't even seen the threat coming from behind.

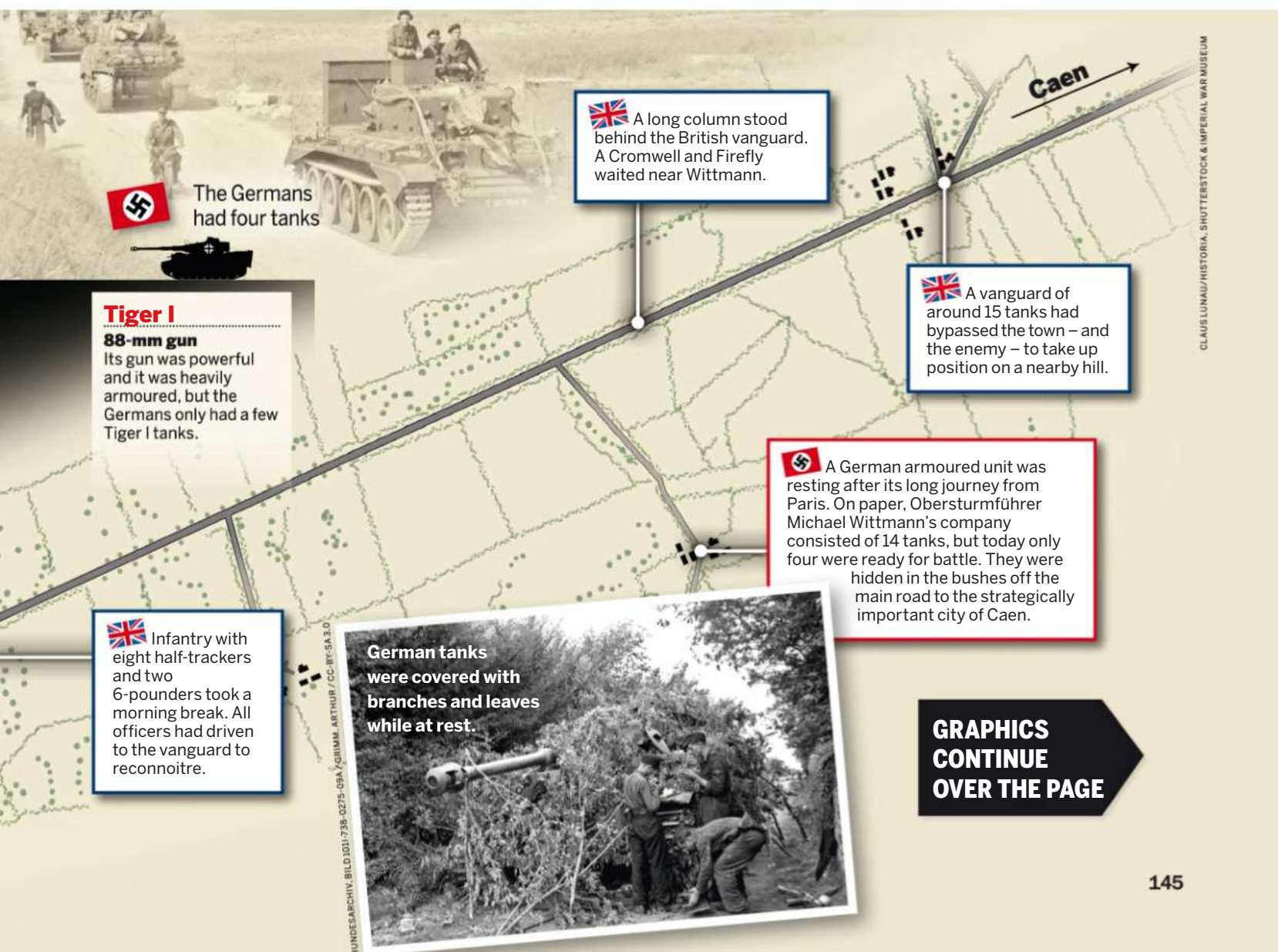
"[I] surprised the English as much as they had me", said Wittmann after the battle. He took the tank on

**"[I] SURPRISED THE ENGLISH AS MUCH AS THEY HAD ME"**

to the road and directed his gunner towards the next target: a British Sherman Firefly, barely a hundred metres further away that was now moving its long barrel slowly towards the unexpected danger. A single shot from Tiger 222 ended its advance.

Wittmann now had a difficult choice to make. To the right, on the road to Caen, was the British vanguard containing all the tanks he'd previously seen rolling past. In the opposite direction lay a large, but unknown number of enemy vehicles – he didn't know how many or how well-equipped they were. His instincts and five years of experience in the German panzer divisions determined his choice.

"I had no time to assemble my company", said Wittmann after the battle. "I set off with one tank and passed the order to the others not to retreat a single step but to hold their ground." While the other remaining Tigers would block the vanguard, ►





# Two elite forces went straight at each other

**The battle in Villers-Bocage was fought between two powerful units – both with a proud reputation and notable victories behind them.**



## Montgomery's Desert Rats

★ Expectations among the British

7th Armoured Division were sky high when the force landed on the French coast. The “Desert Rats”, named after their emblem, had been acclaimed and were famous for their battles against Rommel’s Afrika Korps. General Montgomery had demanded the elite force accompany him as he left North Africa to take part in D-Day.

But the experienced armoured troops’ efforts were disappointing. The division moved forward slowly in attack, officers made basic errors and morale among the main fighting forces was low. Some historians believe the war veterans were exhausted after four years of fighting and that they had lost the will to battle hard for victory.



## Hitler's armoured bodyguards

★ The Leibstandarte SS

Adolf Hitler was created as the Führer’s personal bodyguard, but became a well-equipped panzer division in the Nazi Waffen-SS in 1944.

Its most powerful unit was the 101st SS Heavy Panzer Battalion that possessed Tiger I tanks.

Leibstandarte’s impressive efforts on the battlefield were offset by its participation in numerous massacres of both civilians and Allied POWs.

German Tiger tanks were grouped in special armoured battalions.

▶ Wittmann launched himself into a race to almost certain death down the highway. Without realising it, he and his men had decided to take the fight to an entire armoured division. One of World War II’s boldest actions had begun.

Wittmann’s solo attack started when he came within range of eight parked British armoured troop carriers. Alongside them were those soldiers who’d taken the opportunity to stretch their legs during a break in the advance. Some were drinking tea.

**THE AROMA OF** tea had just permeated the air when Wittmann’s huge Tiger thundered towards them. The morning peace was replaced by panic as the German tank opened fire.

“They were so surprised that they took to flight, but not with their vehicles”, explained Wittmann. “Instead they jumped out, and I shot up the battalion’s vehicles as I drove by.”

The tank saved its precious supply of shells by using its machine guns to take care of the poorly armoured M5 troop carriers. At the same time, the Tiger continued down the road. Wittmann trusted its thick front armoured plating and made no attempt to protect the tank from enemy fire.

The parked British vehicles had been reduced to burning wrecks when Wittmann caught sight of his next target: three light M3 Stuart tanks. Their 37-mm guns bounced harmlessly off his Tiger.

The foremost Stuart began to swing out into the middle of the road – perhaps a desperate ploy to hold Wittmann up by standing as a roadblock. But an 88-mm shell from the Tiger’s gun smashed through the Stuart’s armour and killed half its four-man crew. The explosion sounded a warning to the British further back that something was happening.

Behind the three Stuart tanks, on the outskirts of Villers-Bocage, were the armoured regiment’s command tanks who directed the British advance. The regimental commander himself wasn’t there – he’d felt something was amiss and had driven to ▶





## 2 Foolhardy attack begins

Wittmann's Tiger rolls out on the road to Caen where he surprises the British column.

Caen →



CLAUS LUNAU/HISTORIA & SHUTTERSTOCK

## 3 Brits' tea break is interrupted

SS officer surprises British soldiers who are enjoying a quiet morning.

← Villers-Bocage



HULTON-DEUTSCH COLLECTION/  
CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES

## 4 Light tanks sacrifice themselves

Three British tanks attempt to block the way of Wittmann's armoured monster.

← Villers-Bocage

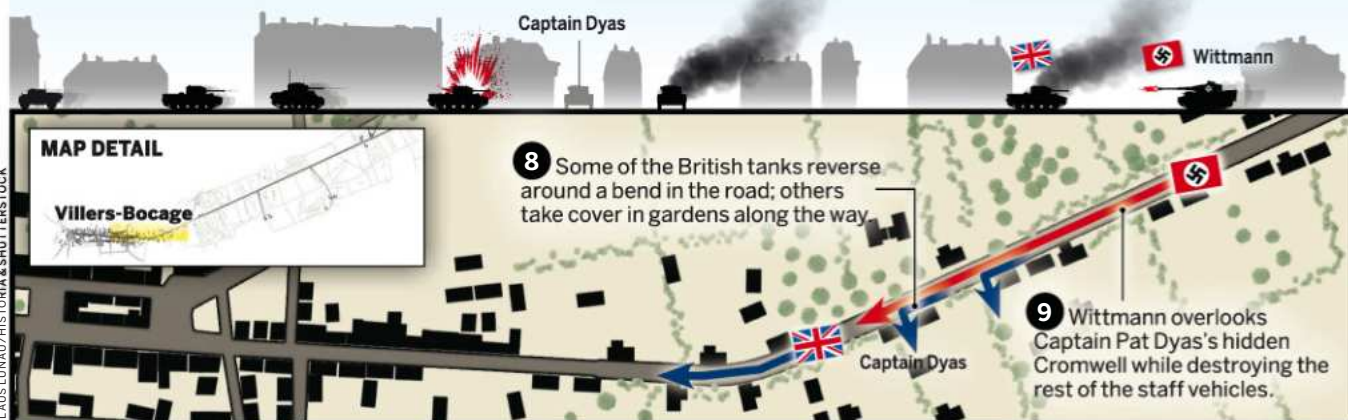




## 5 The British panic

Armoured regimental staff try to flee from the superior enemy.

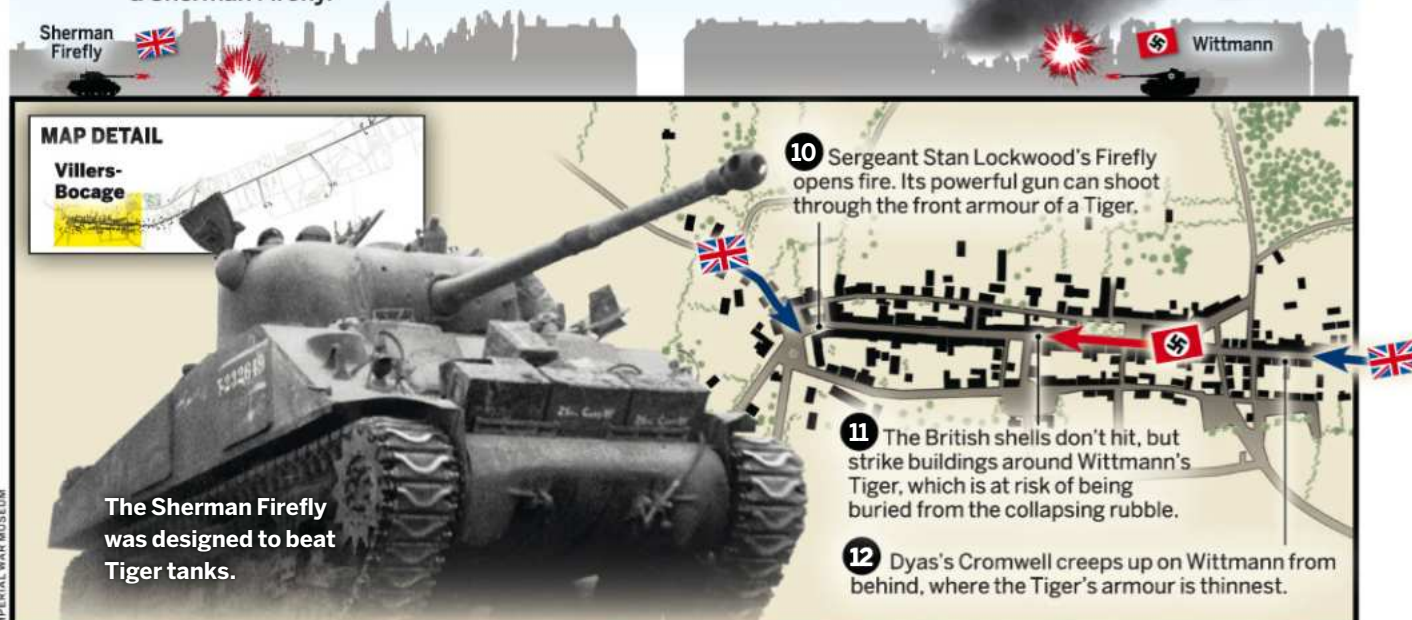
Caen →



## 6 Shootout in Villers-Bocage

Wittmann meets a worthy opponent when he's confronted by a Sherman Firefly.

Caen →



## 7 Wittmann's solo performance ends

The tank turns around and drives back towards his unit before a shell ends its journey.

Caen →





## “EVEN FROM THIS SHORT DISTANCE ITS SHELL EXPLODED HARMLESSLY ON THE THICK PLATING”

► the vanguard by tank. The other staff tanks had remained in the column.

Lieutenant John Cloudsley-Thompson, who commanded one of the Cromwell tanks, saw the flames when the little Stuart exploded further ahead. He watched his commander start to reverse and ordered his tank's driver to do the same. Behind them, the road made a turn – if they could get around it, they'd be outside the range of the unknown enemy that lay somewhere in front of them.

**THE RECENTLY INTRODUCED** Cromwell tank was designed to drive fast – but only if it was going forward. In reverse its top speed was just three kilometres per hour. “Suddenly an armour-piercing shell whizzed between my radio operator's head and me”, Cloudsley-Thompson recounted later. He decided to get off the road and ordered the driver to turn and reverse through a hedge between two houses. Captain Pat Dyas's Cromwell followed suit.

At that moment, shells began to fall over those tanks still trying to reverse around the bend in the road. Then Cloudsley-Thompson got his first sight of the enemy who'd created the chaos: “Through the smoke I could make out the shape of a huge Tiger and I was not more than 25 yards away.”

His Cromwell's gun thundered off a shot, but even from this short distance its shell exploded harmlessly on the enemy's thick frontal plating. The 23-year-old lieutenant held his breath as the Tiger's 88-mm gun was slowly trained on him.

“Boom! We were hit!” Cloudsley-Thompson said, feeling a burning sensation as the shell passed between his legs before smashing into the engine.

His mouth was full of sand and burned paint. “Get out!” he managed to cry and jumped out of the tank, followed by his entire crew – all had escaped without injury.

“Undamaged, the Tiger drove on; its commander waved his cap and laughed,” Cloudsley-Thompson recalled later.

**THE SS COMMANDER** failed to spot Dyas's Cromwell, which sat in the garden next door. As the Tiger passed, the British tank had a clear shot at the German's thinner side plating. But Dyas couldn't take advantage of this unique opportunity: his gunner had disappeared. Just before the battle had begun, he'd gone out to relieve himself and ►



Michael Wittmann was often seen in German newspapers.

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## Panzer ace was propaganda tool

★ Michael Wittmann was one of Nazi Germany's most successful tank commanders and was followed by the Nazi propaganda machine. Wittmann was in the Waffen-SS when Nazi Germany invaded Poland in 1939. He took command of his first Tiger tank in 1943 and started to accumulate “kills” at furious speed.

Some sources have claimed he took out 30 Soviet tanks in

just five days during the Battle of Kursk in 1943. The following year, Wittmann fought against the British in Normandy and his triumph at Villers-Bocage was hailed in the German media. Hitler recalled him to Berlin to personally award him a medal for victory. But back in France, a British shell finally accounted for Wittmann and his entire Tiger crew on 8th August, 1944.

### The Germans counted Wittmann's victories

**138 enemy tanks**

**132 anti-tank guns**

★ Despite his many kills, Wittmann ranked number four in the German rankings: Kurt Knispel topped with 168 tanks.



## “WITTMANN’S RAID CAME TO A SUDDEN END WHEN A SHELL HIT THE TIGER’S BELT ASSEMBLY”

► failed to return. The Tiger continued into the town of Villers-Bocage.

Only two of the regimental staff tanks had managed to get around the bend in the road out of the German’s firing line. From there they fervently tried to get off the main street before the Tiger arrived.

In front of them lay two Observation Post (OP) tanks – one an unarmed Sherman without a main gun. The Germans nicknamed Shermans “Tommycookers” because they were so easy to set alight. The tank lived up to its nickname when Tiger 222 came around the bend and fired a shell directly into its turret. Behind it, an OP Cromwell had reversed down a side street and attempted to turn 180 degrees to flee, but a rock got caught between the wheel and one of the caterpillars.

**FROM HIS PLACE** in the turret, the tank commander watched helplessly as the Tiger passed on the main street, stopped, backed up and turned its barrel towards him. Instead of fighting a hopeless battle, he ordered the crew to abandon the stranded Cromwell. The commander stumbled as he threw himself headlong through a shop window. A second later, the Germans fired their gun.

Wittmann had now taken his morning’s tally to ten British tanks destroyed along with several armoured vehicles.

His gunner was swinging the tank barrel back on to the main street when a shell slammed into the wall of the house next door. The next shot was a direct hit, but flicked away off the Tiger 222’s front plating.

This opponent was a Sherman Firefly. It had a more powerful gun than even the Tiger’s 88-mm cannon. The German tank returned fire, but missed. The duelling vehicles were separated by just over 400 metres, and visibility was worsened by the dust that rose as shells smashed into the walls of surrounding buildings. After a few more attempts, neither gunmen could clearly make out their targets.

Wittmann decided that the time had come to return to his unit. The British appeared to have recovered after the initial shock of his attack. He reversed the Tiger and then turned to drive back out of Villers-Bocage. It ruined Captain Dyas’s chances of a sneak attack from the rear.

Dyas’s Cromwell had come through the attack on the regimental staff unscathed, and once Wittmann had passed his hideaway he pressed the reserve driver into service as gunner and restarted the hunt.



One of the many Cromwell tanks that Wittmann took out in the small French town of Villers-Bocage.

He met the Tiger coming back the other way, and Dyas’s Cromwell quickly became Tiger 222’s final prey of the day.

**WITTMANN’S RAID CAME** to a sudden end when a shell hit the Tiger’s belt assembly. It was unclear where the shot originated, but the Tiger was knocked out and Wittmann ordered his crew of four to abandon the vehicle. The men set course towards German lines.

“Made my way to a division, about 15 kilometres. Had to dodge enemy tanks several times”, Wittmann reported that evening. The British offensive ended

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in failure, and they were forced to withdraw from Villers-Bocage. A few days later, Wittmann was able to recover Tiger 222 and leave the story of his remarkable battle to the newspapers and German propaganda machine. 🇩🇪

**Esben Mønster-Kjær** is a military historian.

**Further reading:** Villers-Bocage – Through the Lens, *After the Battle* (1999) by Daniel Taylor  
★ *Michael Wittmann and the Waffen SS Tiger Commanders of the Leibstandarte in WWII* (2006) by Patrick Agte.



The remains of the British column of half-track vehicles and Bren Carriers that were shot to pieces by Wittmann's tanks. In the foreground is a British 6-pounder (57-mm) gun.



# SS PIONEERED

The Waffen-SS was not only known as an organisation with fanatically devoted and efficiently organised soldiers. It was also a groundbreaker in the military field. When German armed forces developed new weapons during the war, it was often soldiers from the Waffen-SS who were first equipped.

Text: **JONAS NILSSON**

EVERETT COLLECTION/IBL

- 
- 1. ASSAULT RIFLES**
  - 2. CAMOUFLAGED UNIFORM**
  - 3. ANTI-TANK WEAPONS**



# WAR MATERIEL

This Nazi propaganda photo shows SS soldiers in camouflage uniform during the Ardennes offensive in 1944. The Waffen-SS were quick to realise the benefits of camouflage.

**“THE UNIFORMS WERE HIGHLY SOUGHT AFTER AND BECAME THE HALLMARK OF THE WAFFEN-SS”**





# 1 ASSAULT RIFLES

Sturmgewehr was first of its kind



**W**affen-SS marksmen were primarily equipped with rifles (Karabiner 98k) at the beginning of the war. This was a short-barrelled version of the Gewehr 98, the standard weapon used by Germans in World War I. The weapon had a limited storage capacity with five standard-calibre (7.92 x 57 mm) cartridges and an effective range of around 500 metres.

Unit commanders, their deputies and some troops were equipped with machine guns (usually the MP 40), their magazines capable of holding 32 cartridges of 9 x 19-mm calibre and an effective range of 100-150 metres. Firing speed was around 550 shots per minute.

**FOLLOWING THE INVASION** of the Soviet Union, the Waffen-SS was mostly occupied with the battles on the Eastern Front. Soviet tactics primarily involved mass infantry assaults against limited targets. These attacks proved difficult for the Waffen-SS to repel. The standard Karabiner 98ks could only fire one shot at a time and needed reloading after just five shots. In several cases, German positions were overpowered by Soviet mass attacks. Despite the fact Waffen-SS infantry were also armed with

light machine guns, it was clear their defensive fire power was insufficient. This resulted in the new development of a new hand gun in 1942 under the command of weapon designer Hugo Schmeisser. One of the biggest hurdles was that a fully automatic rifle clicked into use too easily. This was caused by heavier recoil due to the powerful gun's fire.

**THE SOLUTION WAS** a shorter version of the German standard-calibre cartridge at 7.92 x 33 mm. The weapon also incorporated a straight-line recoil configuration that made it easier to resist the muzzle rise of the gun barrel during combat.

These seemingly small innovations were introduced first in the Sturmgewehr 44 (StG-44), allowing the marksman to deliver controlled automatic fire. Field trials were initiated with some Waffen-SS units in October 1943, and results showed the weapon to be effective. In battles against an enemy armed with the Soviet PPSH-41 submachine gun, the STG-44's longer range was an advantage along with its ability to deliver

## ★ FACTS

### Sturmgewehr 44

#### Calibre:

7.92 x 33 mm

#### Magazine:

30 cartridges

#### Weight:

4.6 kg (unloaded),  
5.13 kg (loaded)

#### Length:

94 cm

#### Rate of fire:

550-600 shots

per minute

#### Range:

300 m (automatic),  
600 m (single shot)

A soldier from the 5th SS Panzer Division Wiking trains his StG-44 rifle on an armoured tank near Warsaw in 1944. Behind him is a marksman with a Karabiner 98k rifle fitted with a telescope.





## “ONE DRAWBACK WAS THAT THE WEAPON WAS SENSITIVE TO DIRT”

controlled automatic fire in close-combat situations. One drawback was that the weapon was sensitive to dirt and had to be kept clean to work. Moreover, there was a lack of tolerance between the bolt and the magazine, which meant that the weapon might jam when firing. However, it was easy to repair because you could split the weapon by removing the barrel. Another disadvantage was that the weapon used a different cartridge than regular ammunition, which caused logistical difficulties with production.

**FIELD TRIALS SHOWED** that the StG-44 was an extremely effective weapon. Large-scale production started in early 1944, and German confidence in the weapon was so great that both the Karabin 98k and MP 40 were planned to be replaced.

The StG-44 was still relatively complicated and expensive to manufacture. The Germans managed to produce about 400,000 units (figures are uncertain) between 1943 and 1945, which is far less than the initial order for four million.

After the war, Russian general and military engineer Michail Kalashnikov studied a captured StG-44, which inspired the Soviet AK-47. 🇷🇺



The ZG 1229 Vampir comprised a telescopic sight with infrared spotlight on top.

## Infrared sight provided secure night shooting

★ Germany was the first country to develop a functioning infrared sight. AEG Zielgerät developed the ZG 1229 Vampir for the StG-44 rifle that provided an infrared filter that boosted natural light.

Work on developing the sight began in spring 1944, but limited field trials were only carried out in February 1945. 310 samples were given to various units in the Waffen-SS and Wehrmacht.

The trials showed that it worked effectively even in almost total darkness. The range was 300-400 metres.

Those Red Army troops who encountered the sharpshooters equipped with infrared sights got an unpleasant surprise. Soviet reports refer to several soldiers who were shot after believing they were invisible to the enemy.

One major drawback was its weight. The sight itself weighed 2.25 kg, which made it difficult to keep the weapon in the ready position for long periods. But an even bigger issue was the need for an external battery pack. The batteries were stored in a

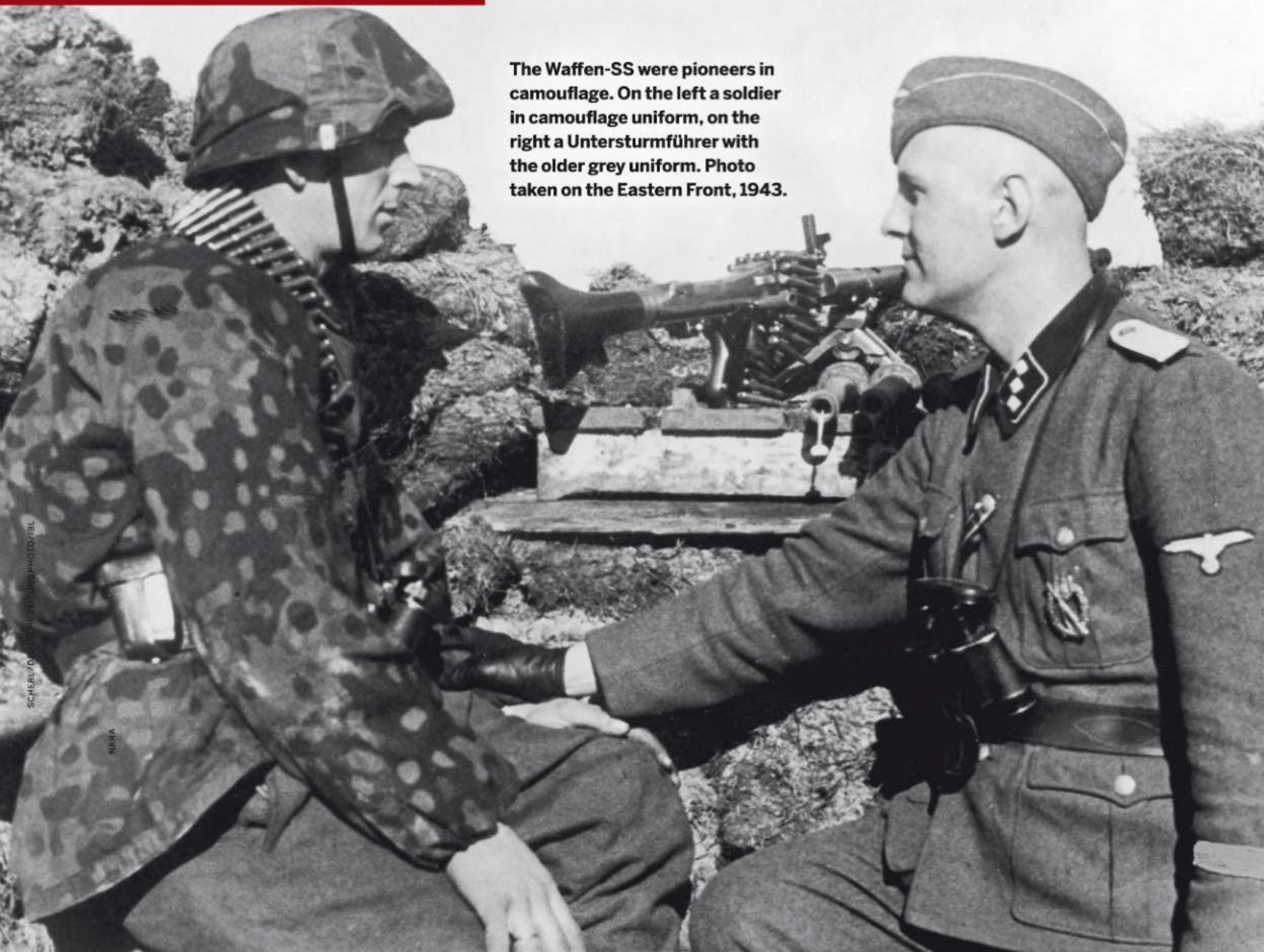
backpack and weighed 13.5 kg. The batteries allowed the device to be lit for around two hours. Given these limitations and the ZG 1229's appearance only when the war was already lost, it's not surprising it never made a major breakthrough.

Germany's experiments with infrared, aimed primarily at artillery and vehicles, started in 1936. Here too AEG had been responsible for development. From 1936 onwards Germany expanded with infrared aimed at artillery and vehicles, again produced by AEG.

In June 1943 a field trial was conducted to test the Zielgerät FG 1250, which was mounted on two armoured tanks from the 6th Panzer Army. Its range was about 600 metres. The trials proved the infrared device increased early detection of enemy armoured vehicles, but it proved difficult to hit these targets using just the infrared sight.

The 1st SS Panzer Division were given a small number of Panther tanks equipped with infrared sight, which they used successfully in fighting in Hungary in March 1945.





The Waffen-SS were pioneers in camouflage. On the left a soldier in camouflage uniform, on the right a Untersturmführer with the older grey uniform. Photo taken on the Eastern Front, 1943.

## 2 CAMOUFLAGED UNIFORM

Reversible jackets offered flexible masking

**G**ermany was the first to introduce field uniform with camouflage fabric. In 1939 the Waffen SS's field uniform was similar to that used by the regular German army.

It consisted of a grey field jacket and coarse woollen trousers, usually accompanied by black boots and a grey field cap. When it was cold, there was a long coat. Few changes were made to the uniform for Waffen-SS soldiers: moving the eagle emblem from the right breast to the left upper arm, plus a few differences in rank insignia, the belt buckle and so on.

This was a relatively old-fashioned uniform that neither concealed the soldier nor kept him warm

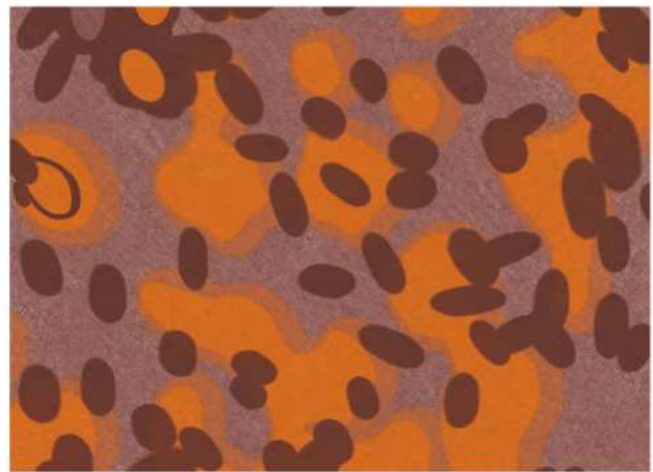
during cold weather. It was largely similar to the uniform used by the German infantry during World War I, plus it didn't fulfil the Waffen-SS's desire to distance itself from the regular German army.

**EXPERIMENTS WITH CAMOUFLAGED** tent cloths, vehicle chassis and so on were carried out by the German army during the 1930s. In 1937 limited field trials were conducted with uniform in camouflage fabric with the Deutschland regiment of the SS-VT under the command of the chief of the German camouflage unit Johan Georg Otto Schick and Sturmbannführer Wim Brant. The uniforms





**Platanenmuster, summer.**



**Platanenmuster, autumn.**

were made from water-repellent, lined cotton in a pattern that the Germans called *Platanenmuster* (plane tree pattern). Various large green and brown areas were covered in lighter and darker irregularly shaped spots. The uniforms were reversible with a greener side that was thought to merge with the green in spring and summer, plus a browner side for autumn. A helmet protector was also introduced with the same pattern.

The field trials confirmed that the soldiers were significantly more difficult to detect in the new uniform than in the usual grey. According to Schick, the soldiers in the new camouflage would have 10-15 percent less risk of being hit by enemy fire.

The disadvantage was that because the material for the uniform was made from water-repellent cotton with the camouflage pattern printed on, it was expensive. Camouflage uniforms were introduced and made available for prioritised forces and soldiers with specialist functions (such as marksmen) within the Waffen-SS in the years 1937-40.

**THE UNIFORMS WERE** highly sought after and became the hallmark of the Waffen-SS. Brantto even tried to patent the pattern in accordance with German civil law to prevent units in the regular Wehrmacht from being able to produce similar uniforms to the Waffen-SS.

This wasn't a complete success – it's known that units from the Wehrmacht – including the Luftwaffe – were equipped with field camouflage uniforms from 1943 on. In 1940, more than 30,000 camouflage uniforms

## **“A SHORTAGE OF COTTON BECAME AN EVER-INCREASING PROBLEM BY THE WAR'S END”**

had been manufactured, making it possible to equip larger Waffen-SS units.

In 1943 a modified pattern was introduced to the camouflaged fabric. The Germans called it *Eichenlaubmuster* (oak leaf pattern A). The pattern was similar to *Platanenmuster*, but with larger spots. At the same time a reversible jacket was introduced: white for winter use and the other side in camouflage when the snow had melted.



**A SHORTAGE OF** cotton became an ever-increasing problem by the war's end, however, and the quality of camouflage uniforms varied greatly in 1944-45.

It's likely that camouflage uniforms did offer some advantage over the enemy, who had uniforms in single-coloured clay-brown cloth (Soviet) or khaki (US and UK).

The camouflage uniform was also considered to be a deterrent to Allied soldiers. If they saw it, they knew they were probably facing often fanatical and aggressive Waffen-SS soldiers. 🇪🇺

**Reversible weapon jacket with white winter camouflage on the inside.**



**“THE WEAPON HAD A  
SIMPLE FLIP-UP SIGHT”**

An SS soldier awaits the enemy with a Panzerfaust 60 as his protection. The Panzerfaust could break through all Allied tanks.



# 3 ANTI-TANK WEAPONS

## Targeted explosion punched through armour

**T**he Germans had realised as early as World War I that infantry needed a portable weapon to use against the tanks the British and French had deployed on the Western Front. A large-calibre rifle was introduced, the Mauser 1918 T-Gewehr with 13.2 x 92-mm cartridges. The weapon was accurate up to around 500 metres and had leg support that helped the marksman, but the effect on the target (tanks) was limited. By the outbreak of World War II, many countries had similar weapons. Lightweight anti-tank guns were also introduced.

Their impact on the increasingly heavy and reinforced tanks was a growing problem during the war. The Soviet T-34 was technically invulnerable to fire from German 37-mm anti-tank guns. The problem became even more acute because the Soviets kept building up its tank strength. The war on the Eastern Front was increasingly a battle between tanks.

It was a frightening prospect for Waffen-SS troops to be confronted by armoured tanks with no means of combating them. One solution was to introduce weapons such as grenades with a directed explosive action. These possessed a cone-shaped explosive charge encased in metal, often copper. On impact, the top was squeezed together and a thin jet of molten metal would cut through even relatively well-armoured vehicles.

**IN 1943, THE** Raketenwerfer 43 anti-tank rocket launcher – known as Panzerschreck – was introduced. Armed grenadiers in the 2nd SS Panzer Division Das Reich were the first to be equipped with the weapon. It was very simple and consisted of a firing tube with simple aiming mechanism. The weapon fired 88mm-calibre shells with a directed explosive effect. The rocket's concentrated metal jet could penetrate 100-mm armour, which was believed to be enough to strike through most tanks – for example, the most common tank type, the T-34, had 60-mm front armour. One drawback was the flame of fire from the rocket's exhaust during launch. The shooter required protective clothing and a protective mask with a filter to avoid burns. The launcher's recoil was also dangerous for those behind, while smoke and dust would reveal the launcher's position. The Raketenwerfer 54, introduced in 1944, had a shield to protect the gunner from the exhaust flame.

Performance was generally good and the Panzerschreck was considered a simple and well-

suited weapon. It was also relatively easy and cheap to produce. Between 1943-45 more than 200,000 weapons were produced. All Waffen-SS divisions were equipped with this model.

**IN AUGUST 1943** the Panzerschreck was partially superseded by the Panzerfaust, which consisted of a tube with black powder as the propellant and a shaped warhead with a directed explosive effect. The weapon had a simple flip-up sight. The calibres varied. The first version, Panzerfaust 30, had a calibre of around 100 mm. The later version, the Panzerfaust 60, had a calibre of 149 mm. Panzerfaust 30 could penetrate 140-mm armour. The introduction of Panzerfaust helped greatly to increase the German infantry's defensive capabilities. No Allied tanks could withstand strikes from a Panzerfaust. The Allies attempted to improve the tank defences by attaching sandbags, logs, and so on. A more "official" effort to improve tank armour saw outer armour plates mounted that caused the shell or rocket to explode prematurely. Thus, a space was created between the armour plate and tank body to lessen the effect of the explosive jet. Panzerfaust disadvantages included a dangerous exhaust flame and the fact the weapon could only be used once.

In January 1945 a version was introduced that could be recharged up to ten times, but it was not widely used. 



### ★ FACTS

**Panzerfaust 60**

**Calibre:** 14.9 cm

**Range:** 60 m

**Weight:** 6.8 kg

**Armour**

**penetration:**

200 mm

### ★ FACTS

**Panzerschreck**

**Calibre:** 88 mm

**Range:** 150 m

**Weight:** 11 kg

**Armour**

**penetration:**

100 mm,

later 160 mm



German soldiers  
with Panzerschreck.

ULSTEIN/GETTY IMAGES



# Unholy alliance held SS at bay

**A determined US Army lieutenant, a disillusioned major from the Wehrmacht and a French tennis star all fought side-by-side during one of WWII's last skirmishes: the Battle for Castle Itter on 5th May, 1945.**

Text: **OLLE BERGMAN**

**I**t was the morning of 4th May, 1945, and the US troops were in East Tyrol, half a mile from the German border. Lieutenant Jack Lee Jr sat on the tower of his M4 Sherman tank – *Besotten Jenny* – in the small town of Kufstein as he planned how to defend the town square. After five months fighting

in France and Germany, he and his men were weary and fed up of being in “Krautland” just to see out the war’s final days. But the men in Company B of the US 12th Armored Division’s 23rd Tank Battalion had to remain on alert. German forces who refused to surrender were proving stiff resistance in the mountainous landscape and were armed with both tanks and anti-tank guns. The forests swarmed with bitter SS soldiers who were still determined to kill – both American enemies and countrymen who they perceived to be traitors.

**THIS MORNING WAS** about to become almost surreal. A German *Kübelwagen* (lightly armoured vehicle) suddenly rolled towards Lee and his men with a white flag fluttering in the wind. The passenger seat housed a decorated major in the Wehrmacht,

**“THE FORESTS  
SWARMED WITH  
SS SOLDIERS”**



one Josef Gangl, and he presented a strange, yet coherent, story. Higher up in the mountains lay a castle full of French VIP prisoners who feared for their lives and were appealing to be rescued. Lee didn't hesitate for a moment and contacted his superior over the radio to get permission to investigate. He took a seat in the back of the German vehicle for a reconnaissance trip. Soon he would play the lead role in what would become known as the "strangest battle of World War II".

**CASTLE ITTER, OR** *Schloss Itter* in its native language, has medieval roots and is located on a hill near the ski resort of Kitzbühel. At the beginning of 1943 it was converted into a special prison for VIP prisoners, called *Ehrenhäftlinge* (detainees of honour). These were politicians and military leaders who were treated decently and lived quite comfortably in anticipation of an eventual negotiated release – or swift execution. Administratively, Castle Itter belonged to the concentration camp Dachau outside Munich, around ten miles to the north.

By the end of the war, the prisoners in Castle Itter comprised a mixture of France's social elite, including former Prime Ministers Edouard Daladier and Paul Reynaud, plus military commanders Maurice Gamelin and Maxime Weygand. The most colourful character was Jean Borotra, a former world-class tennis player



Josef Gangl.



Jean Borotra.



Jack Lee Jr.



Castle Itter is located around 3 km west of Kitzbühel.



The castle was built to cope with a classical siege in the Middle Ages. The basics were not so different in May 1945.



► and a well-known sportsman in his homeland. Maintenance and services were carried out by a small number of regular prisoners of war. The guard garrison, comprising personnel from the notorious SS-Totenkopf division, was commanded by Hauptsturmführer Sebastian Wimmer.

On 3rd May, Wimmer dispatched one of the prisoners, Yugoslav Zvonimir Čučković, on an errand. What he didn't realise was that Čučković also carried a secret letter, written in English, with a plea for help. The French prisoners had an overview of the military situation and feared that they would be cleared out of the way in the chaos of the war's final days.

After cycling to Innsbruck, six miles further west, Čučković passed on the message to an American unit. A rescue force was being prepared, but it had run into trouble and the relief mission was delayed.

The alcoholic Wimmer became increasingly nervous, not least because a few days earlier the commander at Dachau, Eduard Weiter, had appeared drunk at Castle Itter before shooting himself. On 4th May, Wimmer left his post, and shortly after, the guards also abandoned the prison.

**Politician  
Edouard  
Daladier  
and General  
Maurice  
Gamelin shortly  
after their  
release. The  
castle is in the  
background.**

**THE PRISONERS STILL** feared for their lives and planned how to defend themselves. They broke into the weapon store and found small arms and ammunition. In the town of Itter they contacted a German soldier whom they trusted: Hauptsturmführer Kurt-Siegfried Schrader, who'd been exempted from service because of an injury. He agreed to lead the defence of the castle with the prisoners.

Now another prisoner departed, the Czech chef Andreas Krobot. He rode to the city of Wörgl on

## "AN EXPLOSION WAS HEARD AND THE LINE WENT DEAD"

the morning of 4th May and carried a letter in English. The city was swarming with Waffen-SS soldiers, but he was lucky and chanced on an Australian resistance fighter in a side street. Krobot was quickly taken to their leader, Wehrmacht Major Josef Gangl, who had switched sides and now tried to protect the civilian population from abuses. Gangl decided to act, got into a Kübelwagen and drove to the Americans in nearby Kufstein, where he encountered Lieutenant Lee.

After Gangl and Lee had visited the castle and met the French, they promised to return with a relief force. Initially they hoped to be able to muster a large group, but due to tactical decisions and some issues encountered on the road, it shrunk to practically nothing. By the time the force eventually reached the castle in the afternoon, it comprised Lieutenant Lee's M4 Sherman and crew, a handful of infantry from the US's 142nd Infantry Regiment and a dozen or so German soldiers, including Major Gangl.

At the castle the prisoners informed them that German soldiers had moved into the surrounding area and that they'd brought anti-tank guns. Lee, Gangl and Schrader then started organising a defence and placed the Sherman in the middle of the castle entrance.

**THE SS SOLDIERS** were obviously prepared for a fierce battle to enter the castle. In the early hours of 5th May, they began to test the defences through advanced patrols and gunfire. After dawn broke the defenders received a setback when a young German soldier in the defence force left the castle and switched to the enemy. Now it was impossible to hide the fact the defensive force was only a small one.

Shortly afterwards, the situation became far worse when the defenders discovered that a larger enemy force had arrived in transport vehicles. They were evidently from the 17th SS Panzer-Grenadier Division. Soon the area around the castle had filled with Waffen-SS soldiers with their characteristic camouflaged uniforms – a total of around 100-150 men. It was also clear the Germans had two anti-aircraft guns – one 20-mm, the other 88-mm.

In the morning, the Waffen-SS soldiers began to shell the castle with increasing intensity while advancing from different directions. In the middle of the chaos, however, the defenders discovered they still had a working phone line. Through this, Gangl managed to call down to Wörgl and pick up another three defenders from the city, who were able to reach the castle without being stopped on the road.

The fighting became increasingly fierce as the anti-aircraft gun fired explosive grenades against







US forces with a M4 Sherman tanks approach the castle on 5th May, 1945.

ERIC SCHWAB/AFP/TT

the castle walls and Lee's Sherman *Besotten Jenny* was destroyed by the other cannon. The defenders returned fire, but they had little ammunition. Five of the French prisoners participated in the fighting, despite the fact the commanders ordered them to stay in the basement. When Gangl was trying to get 67-year-old former Prime Minister Reynaud away from a dangerous situation, the major was hit by a bullet to his head – probably from a sniper – and died.

As Lee processed the loss, the phone suddenly rang again. Thanks to Austrian resistance fighters, Major John Kramers of the US 103rd Infantry Division – who was travelling to Innsbruck to rescue the prisoners – had managed to make contact. Lee immediately responded: "They're shelling the bajabers out of us. Listen, better get some doughs [GIs] up here right away." Then an explosion was heard and the line went dead.

**KRAMERS, DESPITE BEING** outside his division's sphere of influence, helped put together a rescue force. At the same time, back at the castle Lee received a suggestion from Jean Borotra. During his internment at the castle, the adventurous tennis star had completed a couple of half-successful escape attempts, and said he was willing to run through the German lines and brief the rescue force with a situation report. No sooner said than done: Borotra disguised himself as an Austrian farmer, jumped down from the wall, trudged cautiously past a German machine gun post and started down into the valley. One of the officers in

the rescue force – a sport journalist – couldn't believe his own eyes when a French tennis legend suddenly appeared in the middle of enemy territory jogging at a steady pace towards them.

When the relief force appeared at the castle – like the cavalry in a western movie – a Waffen-SS soldier was about to blow up the gate using a Panzerfaust. At this point, the defenders' ammunition was almost exhausted and they had retreated to the inner keep to fight one final battle.

**THE SIGHT OF** US tanks and troop vehicles saw the Waffen SS soldiers quickly disappear into the surrounding terrain. In a minute, the castle's hopeless situation had been transformed into one of relief and cheering. The rescue force also included one of the tanks from Lee's own Company B, and it was to his friend the tank commander that Lee said jokingly, "What kept you?"

What orders the Waffen SS soldiers had been given, or how they'd perceived the situation, nobody knows today; it's assumed that they had been ordered to execute the prisoners.

Two days later, Germany's unconditional surrender came into effect. The 27-year-old lieutenant Jack Lee Jr received the Distinguished Service Cross for his efforts. Josef Gangl was honoured with a gate in Wörgl, three kilometres from the place where he died. ★

**Olle Bergman** is a freelance journalist.

**Further reading:**  
**The Last Battle** (2013)  
by Stephen Harding.



# HITLER'S

The SS division with the closest ties to Adolf Hitler was his personal bodyguard: Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler. The force was deployed across all fronts during the war and took no account of either their own losses or their enemy's pleas for mercy.

Text: **SVANTE SANDBLOM**



Adolf Hitler inspects his bodyguard at their barracks in Berlin-Lichtenfelde. Sepp Dietrich, the division's commander, walks on his right.



# DIVISION

A black and white photograph showing a large formation of soldiers in a trench. The soldiers are wearing helmets and long coats, and are holding rifles. They are arranged in a long line, receding into the distance. In the background, there is a large, multi-story building with many windows. The ground in the foreground is covered in snow or mud.

**"THEY THOUGHT THEY WERE SUPERIOR,  
A CHOSEN ELITE OF A SUPERIOR RACE"**





Soldiers from Leibstandarte stand to attention in Königsplatz Square in Munich on 11th September, 1935.

**SS** division Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler – Hitler’s personal bodyguard – fought on all European fronts during World War II. The division was an infantry task force tasked with taking on offensives against hopeless odds and plugging holes in the German front lines. Leibstandarte fought bravely without any regard for its losses, but it was equally dispassionate towards its enemies, showing them no mercy. The division’s war crimes were countless: both prisoners of war and civilians became victims of its ruthless soldiers.

In 1925, an early precursor to Leibstandarte was established: the *Schutzkommando* (Protection Command). It was set up to provide a bodyguard for Hitler during a turbulent time in German history where there was much street violence, making it important that the budding Nazi movement guarantee its leader’s security. In order to create a strong bond with the future Führer, soldiers in Hitler’s bodyguard swore a personal oath of



**Early in 1941, a skeleton key was introduced as the division’s symbol to honour its commander, Sepp Dietrich. Dietrich means a key that can open all locks in German.**

allegiance to him for the first time on 9th November, 1933. The solemn, formal ceremony took place at Odeonsplatz, a square in the centre of Munich. Five months later, on 13th April, 1934, the unit received its new name: Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler.

The unit was often present during Hitler’s official appearances, wearing its characteristic black SS parade uniform. Leibstandarte’s troops were often contemptuously dismissed as “asphalt soldiers” by the regular German armed forces (Wehrmacht), who continually vied with the SS bodyguards for the Führer’s favour.

**THE ENTRY REQUIREMENTS** for new recruits were tough. The idea was to ensure that only the ‘best’ young Germans could apply. Applicants needed to be a minimum of 170cm tall, be in excellent physical condition and be able to demonstrate that they had several generations worth of Aryan antecedents.

The training of new recruits for Leibstandarte took place in the Lichterfelde barracks south-west of Berlin. The large complex of buildings was surmounted with a giant German eagle and the text “Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler” in capital letters. Statues of old German emperors adorned the site, which also featured a huge dining room that could seat up to a thousand people.

The soldiers in Leibstandarte thought of themselves as a select elite. Aggressiveness, physical endurance and a willingness to win at all costs were key parts of

**“THE SNOW WAS WAIST-DEEP AND THERE WASN’T ROOM TO DEPLOY FOUR TANKS ABREAST, LET ALONE SIX ARMoured DIVISIONS.”**



their training. The saying “attack is the best defence” characterised the culture of strength from the outset.

The recruits came from various locations within Germany, and many of them were the sons of peasants. The soldiers enlisted for 12 years, and the indoctrination was extensive: lessons on Nazi ideology were taught three times a week.

Leibstandarte – as Hitler’s own elite force – took a leading role during the occupation of the Rhineland in 1935, the Nazis’ first step in challenging the Treaty of Versailles from 1919. It continued at the forefront of things as Hitler extended his territory further with the annexation of Austria and the Sudetenland in 1938, and the rest of Czechoslovakia in 1939.

At the end of 1938, Leibstandarte became a regiment, but remained under Wehrmacht command in battle. During the Polish campaign in September 1939, Leibstandarte was first attached to the 17th Infantry Division and later the 4th Panzer Division. Leibstandarte participated in the Battle of the Bzura, which was fought west of Warsaw, where the Poles mounted their largest counteroffensive of the war.

**LEIBSTANDARTE’S TROOPS FOUGHT** without any regard for their own losses. As a result, it took significantly more damage during the Polish campaign than the Wehrmacht. Like other SS forces, Leibstandarte also treated civilians without mercy: in Blonie its troops murdered 50 Jews, while 200 Polish civilians were killed in Zloczew.

Along with other units in the German Army, Leibstandarte was able to rest during the winter of 1939-40. Hitler visited the unit in its winter lodgings at Bad Ems in the Rhineland during December 1939.

On 10th May, 1940, the Nazis began their offensive against Western Europe. Leibstandarte was deployed to the northern section of the Front, attacking the Netherlands and Belgium. It managed to capture 3,500 Dutch soldiers, but became notorious for its massacre of 80 French and British prisoners of war at Wormhoudt (see box, right).

Leibstandarte continued to be part of the offensive, advancing deep into France. Following France’s surrender on 22nd June, 1940, Leibstandarte began training to carry out landings on English beaches as part of Operation *Seelöwe* (Sea lion), the Germans’ planned invasion of Britain. The plan was aborted.

Leibstandarte then moved to Bulgaria in February 1941 as part of the preparations for the upcoming offensives against Yugoslavia and Greece, which started on 6th April, 1941. After hard fighting in the Klidi Pass, British and ANZAC troops from the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps were defeated by German forces and Leibstandarte took part in the victory parade in Athens.

When the Germans massed their forces in the build up to the invasion of the Soviet Union during



An American soldier looks down on the bodies of US prisoners of war killed in the Malmedy massacre during December 1944.

US ARMY

## The division was ruthless

★ Leibstandarte was responsible for countless criminal actions during World War II:

### WORMHOUDT MASSACRE

On 28th May, 1940, after helping buy time for their comrades to escape from Dunkirk, 80 British and French soldiers were taken prisoners of war before being gunned down in a barn in a hamlet near Wormhoudt.

Major General Wilhelm Mohnke was accused of being responsible for the incident, but was never charged.

### EASTERN FRONT

According to allegations made by Erick Kern, a journalist who served with Leibstandarte’s 4th Battalion, the division executed 4,000 Russian prisoners of war in retaliation for around 100 Germans whom it believed to have been captured and hung by Russians troops a few miles from Gejgova.

Later that year, during the fighting around Kharkov, Kurt ‘Pantermeyer’ Meyer ordered

an entire village torched and its inhabitants murdered. There is also evidence to suggest that Leibstandarte was involved in a massacre of tens of thousands of Russian civilians during its occupation of Kharkov, including hospital patients, but the Soviets failed to prosecute the criminals after the war.

### MALMEDY MASSACRE

On 17th December, 1944, 86 US prisoners of war were shot after being captured near Malmedy in Belgium. It has been claimed that George Fleps, a 21-year-old volunteer from Romania, opened fire with his machine gun before other SS men joined the slaughter. Survivors were finished off with small arms.

### BATTLE OF THE BULGE

During the Battle of the Bulge, a number of civilians were executed in Stavelot in the area where Kampfgruppe Peiper’s group was fighting. Around 130 civilians were killed in a single day.





Adolf Hitler surrounded by senior officers from Leibstandarte. Sepp Dietrich sits on his right.

ULSTEINBILD/IBL

## Division commanders

### JOSEF 'SEPP' DIETRICH

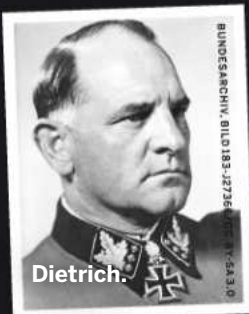
1933 - June 1943

★ Dietrich and Hitler met for the first time in 1921. Seven years later Dietrich became a member of the Nazi party. As

one of the Führer's personal bodyguards, Dietrich was close to Hitler, which made his boss Himmler jealous.

He was Leibstandarte's great star until the end of the war. He rose rapidly through the ranks of the SS, but remained strongly linked to the division. He liked to eat with the men, something that was not common in the army at this time.

Dietrich was relatively small, but had powerful



Dietrich.

charisma. A father figure for the men of Leibstandarte, he viewed soldiers as individuals, but was also strict and authoritarian.

Field Marshal Gerd von

Rundstedt described Dietrich as "decent, but stupid", while SS General Felix Steiner reported that he once spent an hour and a half with Dietrich trying to explain a situation with the aid of a map, but Dietrich did not understand anything of the drawing in front of him.

Dietrich was captured by US forces at the end of the war and spent 10 years in prison. He died of a heart attack on 21st April, 1966.

► Operation Barbarossa, Leibstandarte was attached to Army Group South. The division participated in the encircling battles at Uman and Kiev before capturing, losing and then reclaiming Rostov.

After recapturing Rostov in 1942, it was pulled from the Eastern Front and stationed in Normandy. While there, Leibstandarte was refitted as a panzer grenadier division and joined the I SS Panzer Corps, returning to the Eastern Front in December.

**THE NEW PANZER** corps contributed to German success at the third battle at Kharkov in March 1943 where, under the leadership of Erich von Manstein and against all odds, the Germans stabilised the Southern Front after the disaster of Stalingrad. Leibstandarte attacked with the Waffen-SS division Totenkopf. While the battle was lauded as a great victory, the Germans suffered major losses in the action: 4,500 of Leibstandarte's troops were killed in action alone.

At the Battle of Kursk in July 1943, Leibstandarte was again part of the German offensive. The division now joined the II SS Panzer Corps (Das Reich) and advanced 20 kilometres on the first day of the battle. Michael Wittman, Leibstandarte's legendary panzer tank ace, enjoyed phenomenal success during the Kursk battle: he destroyed eight Soviet tanks and seven Soviet anti-tank guns in a single day.

Despite such efforts, the Nazis struggled to gain the upper hand over the Soviet superpower. The German



CONTINUED ON PAGE 170 ►



offensive at Kursk stalled and Leibstandarte was now needed elsewhere: the Allies had landed in Sicily and Italy was about to sign an armistice with its former enemies. Hitler wanted units that were 100 percent loyal to him and so he withdrew Leibstandarte from the battle at Kursk and sent it to Italy.

**LEIBSTANDARTE MONITORED IMPORTANT** roads and railway hubs in the area of Verona and helped disarm the Italians after they declared a ceasefire on 8th September, 1943. At this time, the unit was converted to a panzer division and battled Italian partisans in the area around Parma.

Things weren't going well for the Germans back on the Eastern Front though. Their offensive had once again stalled in the south after the battle in Kursk, and Leibstandarte was recalled to help stabilise the situation. The division arrived to reinforce the German line at Zhitomir, 140 kilometres south-west of Kiev, in the middle of November 1943. In January the following year, it was re-deployed to help relieve the German forces of Army Group South who were encircled in the Korsun Pocket. The action extricated around 30,000 Wehrmacht troops, but 56,000 were left behind to face the horrors of Soviet captivity.

Following the battles around Korsun, most of the Leibstandarte division was transported to Belgium for rest and reequipping. By the end of April 1944, the division was back to full strength. Leibstandarte

## **“LEIBSTANDARTE WAS REFITTED AS A PANZER GRENADIER DIVISION AND JOINED THE I SS PANZER CORPS”**

was deployed north of the Seine as part of Hitler's strategic armoured reserve to counter the Allied landings that were expected around Calais. It was not until the end of June that the division headed to Normandy, where Leibstandarte fought against the British and Canadians at Caen.

**THE GERMANS MOUNTED** an impressive defence, taking full advantage of Normandy's wooded terrain. In fact, they exceeded many people's expectations, but, in the end, the Nazi forces were overwhelmingly beaten by the Allies' superior hardware and air support. The US Eighth Army finally broke through the German front line, taking Avranches on 30th July. Hitler ordered his men to stage a counterattack, but it failed and Leibstandarte had to fight desperately to avoid being completely wiped out after they were enveloped by the Allies in the Falaise Pocket. The battle led to major losses, and the remains of the Leibstandarte division retreated east to Aachen, where they were refitted once more.

Leibstandarte went on to join up with its former chief, Field Marshal Josef 'Sepp' Dietrich, who was ►

**SS Panzer Grenadier Division  
Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler during  
Operation Spring Awakening in Hungary  
in 1945.**





## ► DIVISION COMMANDERS (CONTINUED)

**THEODOR WISCH**

4th June, 1943 –  
20th Aug, 1944

★ Wisch was one of the first members of Leibstandarte, joining in March 1933. He was a company commander during the Polish campaign in 1939 and he was awarded the Iron Cross. Wisch led the regiment



from June 1942 and became its head on 27th July, 1943 when he was 36. He was severely injured in the Battle of the Falaise Pocket and had to surrender command to

Wilhelm Mohnke. Wisch did not have Dietrich's charisma, but was respected for his professionalism.

**WILHELM MOHNKE**

20th Aug, 1944 –  
6th Feb, 1945

★ Mohnke joined the Nazi party in 1931 and was chosen by Dietrich to be one of the first members of SS Stabswache Berlin, a forerunner of Leibstandarte.

He was wounded in the leg during a Yugoslav air attack and surgeons were forced to amputate part of his foot. While he was recovering he was awarded the German Cross in Gold.

After the defeat at the Battle of the Falaise Pocket in August 1944, the German army retreated in disarray. Mohnke was one of the few commanders who managed



to steady the displaced troops to fall back in good order.

In February 1945, he was forced to hand over the command to Otto Kumm after

he was injured during an air raid in Hungary.

On 2nd May, 1945, he was captured by Russian soldiers after leading an escape attempt from Hitler's bunker. After 10 years as a prisoner of war, six of them in solitary confinement, Mohnke was finally released.

After the war, he was accused of being involved in the Wormhoudt massacre in 1940, but was never charged. He died in 2001 in Barsbüttel in northern Germany.

**OTTO KUMM**

6th Feb, 1945 –  
8th May, 1945

★ The last man to lead Leibstandarte Division, Otto Kumm joined the Nazi party and the SS at the age of 22. He was in great physical shape,



which served him well during winters spent in the Soviet Union. After serving as a commander in the SS divisions Wiking and Prinz Eugen, he took command of

Leibstandarte for the war's final months in February 1945.



Motorcyclists from Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler during a parade in 1939.

## “WE CALL OURSELVES THE ‘6TH PANZER ARMY’, BECAUSE WE’VE ONLY GOT SIX PANZERS LEFT”

Sepp Dietrich kept his sense of humour.

► now commanding the 6th SS Panzer Army in the Ardennes for the Battle of the Bulge, Hitler's last chance to take the initiative.

Initially, the Germans made good progress with Leibstandarte split into four kampfguppe, Kampfgruppe Peiper advancing the furthest. This ad-hoc unit commanded by Colonel Joachim Peiper drove their vehicles over landmines rather than let the attack be slowed by the absence of minesweeper units.

After a week, though, the German offensive began to stall. Dietrich summed up the problems facing him. “All I had to do was to cross the river, capture Brussels, and then go on to take the port of Antwerp. The snow was waist-deep and there wasn't room to deploy four tanks abreast, let alone six armoured divisions. It didn't get light until eight and was dark again at four, and my tanks can't fight at night. And all this at Christmas time!”

The 6th SS Panzer Army was eventually withdrawn and redeployed as part of the strategic reserve, but not before Leibstandarte soldiers had committed a new war crime in Malmedy (see page 117).

Along with the three other Waffen-SS divisions that took part in the Battle of the Bulge, Leibstandarte's next stop was Hungary. Ordered there by Hitler himself, they were tasked with joining Operation Spring Awakening. Staged during





US ARMY

**Panzer grenadiers from Leibstandarte investigate US equipment in Belgium during the Battle of the Bulge.**

March 1945, it was the last German offensive of the war. Its goal was to recapture Budapest and take control of the area's oil fields. But the Soviets were too strong, and the operation failed.

Furious, Hitler ordered Leibstandarte and the other Waffen-SS divisions to remove their armbands as a sign of dishonour for not fighting hard enough. The order was meaningless, however: first, because Dietrich refused to relay it and second, because Leibstandarte, together with Das Reich, Totenkopf and Hohenstaufen, had already removed their armbands before arriving in Hungary to prevent news leaking out that the 6th SS Panzer Army had crossed the border.

**AFTER THE FAILURE** of Operation Spring Awakening, most of Leibstandarte pulled back to Vienna. There the division suffered huge losses and was reduced to two combat groups. Sepp Dietrich kept his humour up to the last: "We call ourselves the '6th Panzer Army', because we've only got six panzers left."

The Battle of Berlin was Leibstandarte's last action. 800 men from Leibstandarte formed the core of the last-ditch defence around the Reich Chancellery and the Führer's bunker until Nazi forces in Berlin finally surrendered on 2nd May, 1945. The Leibstandarte troops who managed to

escape the city surrendered to US troops on the west bank of the Elbe, while the rest surrendered to US forces near the city of Steyr in Austria on 8th May.

**THE STORY OF** Leibstandarte ended as it began, with the division serving as the Führer's personal bodyguard. In between, the unit had fought on battlefields throughout Europe for almost six years in a manner unprecedented in the annals of warfare: its men fought bravely, against hopeless odds, but they often treated prisoners of war and captured civilians with the ruthlessness they'd learned at the barracks in Lichterfelde.

Leibstandarte was a fighting unit, but one can't claim that the Waffen-SS was any less guilty of the systematic eradication of Jews and other 'undesirables'. As author Michael Reynolds stated when writing about Peiper, "As personal adjutant he would have been privy to virtually everything in Himmler's office and he could not have failed to be aware of Hitler's and Himmler's policies for the ethnic cleansing of the Greater Reich, the organisation and establishment of concentration camps and the overall policy for the genocide of the Jewish race." ❖

**Svante Sandblom** is a freelance journalist and writer of military history.

**Further reading:** **SS-Leibstandarte The history of the First SS Division** by Rupert Butler  
★ **Hitler's Warriors** by Charles Whiting  
★ **Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler (LSSAH) at war 1939–1945** by Ian Baxter  
★ **Hitler's Bodyguards** by Alan Wyke.



## THE HOLOCAUST

THE WEHRMACHT'S  
WAR CRIMES

German atrocities on the Eastern Front weren't simply the purview of the SS – the Wehrmacht were also heavily implicated. Nevertheless, the myth that the regular German army played no part in Nazi war crimes has persisted.

Text: NICLAS SENNERTEG



Ernst Busch.

The gunshots and screams outside the hotel window left the new commander of Kaunas completely unmoved. Colonel General Ernst Busch, commander of the German 16th Army, had just sat down with his staff when an officer entered and reported that another pogrom against the city's Jews had broken out.

"This is a political matter that does not interest us", Busch replied loudly. "Perhaps it should interest us, but we are not allowed to meddle. What can we do?"

Kaunas in Lithuania had fallen into the hands of the 16th Army just days after the start of Operation Barbarossa. Shortly after the German army battalions arrived, they were joined by *Einsatzgruppe A* ('Deployment Group A'), a task force from the SS death squads. Over the following days, scenes that appeared to be taken from *Dante's Inferno* were played out on the city streets when the Lithuanian militia, hastily mobilised by the Einsatzgruppen, were set loose on the Jewish population. One of the most horrific massacres occurred just a stone's throw from the 16th Army headquarters, when dozens of Jews were beaten to death outside a petrol station. Among those who witnessed the massacre of at least 1,500 Jews were many soldiers and officers from the regular German army. One even took the

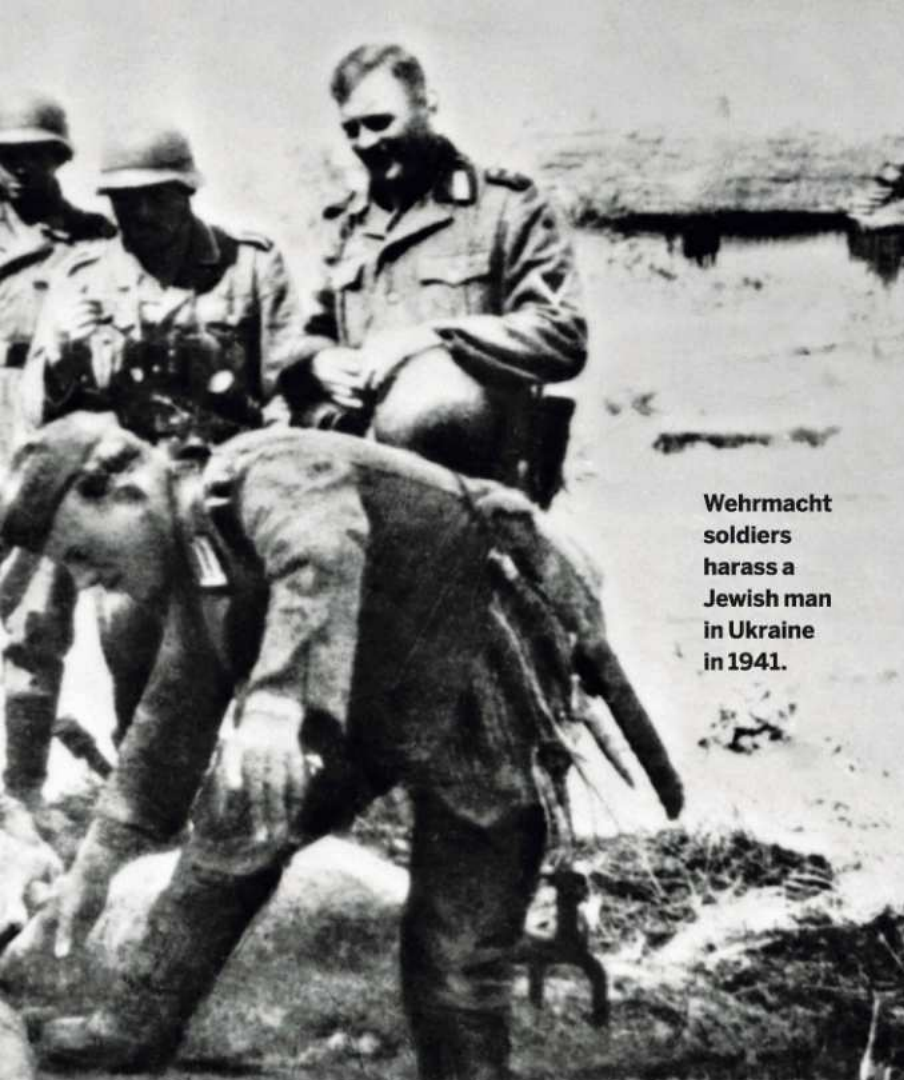
opportunity to take photos. Jews were taken to a couple of old fortresses outside the town and shot.

Busch's troops temporarily refrained from maintaining order and turned a blind eye to these pogroms, which were officially classified as a "spontaneous action" on the part of Lithuanians against pro-Soviet collaborators. Officially, therefore, the army chose to regard it as an internal Lithuanian dispute that must run its course, although there is no doubt that Busch and his staff knew what was really going on.

**IN THE SAME** vein, the commander of the Army Group North Rear Area, General Franz von Roques, visited Kaunas and then complained to the Army Group commander, Field Marshal Wilhelm von Leeb, about the pogroms. The otherwise pious field marshal listened in silence to the report and then just shrugged his shoulders. "We have no influence over these measures. The only thing left is to hold oneself at a distance", he later wrote in his diary. After that, both officers began to discuss instead whether sterilising the Jews would be better than killing them.

Another high-ranking military guest, who visited Kaunas a few days after the first wave of killings, was dispatched directly from the Führer's headquarters to inspect the captured areas. It was Hitler's chief





SOVIET

Wehrmacht soldiers harass a Jewish man in Ukraine in 1941.

## “BOTH OFFICERS BEGAN TO DISCUSS WHETHER STERILISING JEWS WOULD BE BETTER THAN KILLING THEM”

adjutant, Colonel Rudolf Schmudt, who dismissed the pogroms with the statement: “Soldiers should not be burdened with these political questions; it is a matter of a necessary cleaning-up operation.”

**ON THE ONE** hand, the events in Kaunas were typical of the German regular army’s conduct during Barbarossa: look the other way while the SS committed their crimes. On the other hand, the example of Kaunas does not reveal the whole truth about how closely involved the Wehrmacht was in the darkest aspects of Hitler’s great war in the East. In fact, regular army units were implicated in all kinds of war crimes and crimes against humanity: extermination of Soviet Jews, mass murder of Soviet prisoners of war, the deliberate mass starvation of the civilian population, bloody reprisals against innocent and defenceless civilians, looting, killing hostages, and deportation of forced labour.

Historical research has so far not been able to ascertain how many German soldiers and officers on the Eastern Front participated passively or actively ▶

## SS would realise war’s political aims

★ The prime ideological goal of the Nazis in WWII was the ethnic and political transformation of Europe, exterminating Jews and other groups considered inferior. Heinrich Himmler bore the main responsibility for delivering these objectives and the *Schutzstaffel* (SS, ‘Protection Squadron’) was his tool.

The SS was founded in 1925 as the Nazi party’s internal security to provide protection for Hitler and other speakers at its meetings. Under the leadership of Himmler, a former poultry farmer, the organisation developed from 1929 onwards into a kind of party elite, growing its own power base that included police forces, the Gestapo, military units (Waffen-SS), concentration camps, death camps with gas chambers, schools, intelligence services, factories that manufactured everything from mineral water to V-2 rockets, and laboratories that carried out experiments on camp prisoners.

Nazi massacres and war crimes usually associated with the war on the Eastern Front were carried out by the *Einsatzgruppen*, specialist SS death squads led by Reinhard Heydrich, head of the German security service. The four *Einsatzgruppen* that entered the Soviet Union on the heels of the advancing German armies comprised 3,000 members of the Gestapo, Waffen-SS, security services and regular police forces. The groups wore SS or police uniforms but drew on logistical support from the Wehrmacht. In several occupied areas, civilians were also recruited and incited to carry out the killings.

During the first year of the campaign, the death squads were believed to have killed over one million people – particularly Jews – but also Roma, Communist Party officials and suspected partisans. Special police battalions and Waffen-SS units were also guilty of committing these atrocities.

ID tag from an SS *Einsatzgruppe*.





A Soviet political officer is interrogated by German soldiers. By order, all captured Soviet party officials were to be executed.



ILLUSTRATION/AL OVER PRESS

► in Nazi war crimes, but it's clear that the most senior military commanders accepted Hitler's ideological goals in the East without objection. The Führer was able – in his own mind – to ignore international law because the Soviet Union hadn't signed the Geneva Convention, which, among other things, protected the rights of prisoners of war.

**IN MARCH 1941,** Hitler declared to the generals who would take part in the campaign that it would not be an ordinary war but one that would be exceptionally ruthless. The aim was not only to defeat the Soviets on the battlefield and to realise Hitler's dream of *lebensraum* (an ethnically cleansed 'living space' that Aryan races could expand into); it was equally about crushing "Jewish Bolshevism".

This unbendingly ideological war of annihilation was to be waged without the slightest regard for international law, the Führer proclaimed. In other words, it could not "be conducted in a knightly fashion", so officers were expected to "rid themselves of obsolete ideologies".

"I know that the necessity for such means of waging war is beyond the comprehension of you generals but... I insist absolutely that my orders be executed without contradiction", Hitler declared. As a result, in May and June 1941, both branches of German High Command (OKW and OKH) issued a series of illegal orders to ensure the war was waged with the brutality that Hitler demanded. In the dictator's eyes, communism was a political crime, which automatically rendered the Red Army's political officers – commissars – criminals.

## "THIS WAR WAS TO BE WAGED WITHOUT REGARD FOR INTERNATIONAL LAW"

This meant they would not have to be treated like ordinary prisoners of war.

On 6th June, the OKW issued the Commissar Order, which instructed the regular army to shoot captured commissars on the spot or – if they were later discovered in prison camps – to hand them over to the Nazi SD security service for "special treatment", which basically translated into summary execution.

Similarly, the OKW's Barbarossa decree on 13th May 1941 absolved German soldiers of any legal responsibility for any kind of abuse against civilians during the campaign. At the same time, the order stipulated that any Soviet civilian opposing the German occupying power be killed summarily, without any court. The order's aims included giving the army the authority to carry out collective actions against places suspected of harbouring or helping partisans – punishments could include the burning, killing or deportation of the civilian population.

**MANY GENERALS WERE** appalled at the impending slaughter, but almost no one protested. For example, Army Group Centre commander Field Marshal von Bock was persuaded by a staff office to submit an official protest to the OKH. "Let it be noted, gentlemen, that Field Marshal Bock



## Cities would become “Jew-free”

★ At the end of August 1941, German troops captured the Ukrainian city of Krivoy Rog (now Kryvyi Rih) with 200,000 inhabitants. Almost immediately, the local military administration took anti-Jewish measures. Jews

were compelled to wear armbands, made to do forced labour and forbidden to buy food on the same terms as other local Ukrainians.

In addition, the military administration carried out mass murders of Jews. On 15th October,

the military administration reported the city was being made “Jew-free”. Over the course of several days, over 3,000 Jews were removed from Krivoy Rog and murdered by a unit operating under the command of both the SS and local police.

protested – but he protested no further!” von Bock exclaimed on discovering it had been ineffective.

It’s true some commanders refused to pass on the Commissar Order to their troops, but research reveals that up to 80 percent of German divisions carried out the orders.

Even officers like Colonel General Erich Hoepner, who would later become a prominent member of the military resistance to Hitler, conscientiously followed the order to murder this category of prisoner of war. Regular army troops executed at least 4,000 Red Army political officers, but the real figure could be much higher because the deaths may not have always been recorded. Many Jews among the Soviet POWs were also said to have been executed under this order, largely because Nazi terminology equated communists with Jews.

Furthermore, on 28th April 1941, the OKH had granted permission to the Reich Main Security

Office (RHSA)’s Einsatzgruppen and SD security forces to “carry out executive measures against the civilian population” in the army’s operational areas. During the first year of the war in the East, the Einsatzgruppen killed around one million Soviet Jews. However, the army’s contribution to this genocide was far more extensive than tacit consent. Without the cooperation of the army’s occupation authorities and associated units, the genocide would not have been feasible.

**THE LOCAL OCCUPYING** authorities, under the control of Quartermaster General Eduard Wagner, registered the Jewish population, ensuring they were marked out using special features such as armbands or the Star of David, and gathered them into ghettos. The Einsatzgruppen relied on cooperation with senior staff at the front for their support, and in their reports to Berlin, the death ▶

**Partisans captured in July 1941 are forced to dig their own graves before they’re executed. The guards are soldiers from the army.**





## Insurgents and war criminals

★ Some of the generals within the military's anti-Nazi circles played major roles in the Nazis' war crimes during Operation Barbarossa. Their number included Colonel General Erich Hoepner who commanded the 4th Panzer Group, Quartermaster General Eduard Wagner and General Georg Thomas (Head of the Defence Economy and Armament Office in the OKW).

This fact suggests that this part of Hitler's criminal policies happened to resonate with those German generals usually sceptical of the Nazis.

This was probably because when it came to the Soviet Union there was common ground between the conservative generals and Hitler, namely a shared hatred of Bolshevism and contempt for the Slavic peoples.



Eduard Wagner.

Georg Thomas.

► squad commanders often praised the Wehrmacht's willingness to cooperate.

In addition, some regular army units were also directly involved in the mass murders and several senior commanders even issued special orders to their troops in which they justified the slaughter of Soviet Jews. The best-known example comes from Field Marshal von Reichenau, the then-commander of the 6th Army, dated 10th October 1941:

"The most important objective of this campaign against the Jewish-Bolshevik system is the complete destruction of its sources of power and the extermination of the Asiatic influence in European civilisation", the order stated.

"In this Eastern theatre, the soldier is not only a man fighting in accordance with the rules of the art of war, but also the ruthless standard bearer of a national conception and the avenger of bestialities which have been inflicted upon German and racially related nations. For this reason the soldier must learn fully to appreciate the necessity for the severe but just retribution that must be meted out to the subhuman species of Jewry. The Army has to aim at another purpose, in other words, the annihilation of revolts in hinterland which, as experience proves, have always been caused by Jews."

**ANOTHER ASPECT OF** Hitler's genocidal war in the East was the economic exploitation of the captured territories that had been planned by the OKW's economic experts. Just like the armies of ancient times, it was initially intended that the German soldiers would live off the land that they occupied. No consideration was made for the civilian population's needs and already during the planning phase several months before the campaign, the OKW had coldly predicted that millions of civilians would starve to death in the East once the Wehrmacht had seized the lion's share of the food. When the German armed forces

were plagued by supply problems in Russia in the autumn of 1941, unit quartermasters simply requisitioned all food from certain zones to supply the troops, leaving behind acute cases of famine. In Kharkiv, for example, the military administration plundered the city so ruthlessly for food that around 12,000 inhabitants starved to death during the first year's occupation according to the military administration's own statistics.

The siege of Leningrad (modern-day St Petersburg) lasted for almost 500 days from 8th September 1941 to 18th January 1943. Yet it wasn't primarily a military exercise: its purpose was to starve the city's population – around three million people – to death. In this way, they would not be a burden on German food supplies. Somewhere between 500,000 and a million people are believed to have succumbed during the siege.

**THE MAJORITY OF** Soviet soldiers who became German prisoners of war during the first months of the war in the East did not survive long. In total, around two million of a total of 3.7 million Soviet prisoners of war died between the summer of 1941 and the spring of 1942 from various hardships, including hunger. The Wehrmacht was responsible for providing the prisoners with food and shelter, but Soviet soldiers did not receive even the minimum sustenance required to sustain life, let alone a roof over their heads. Many also froze to death under the clear skies when the cold set in.

During the Nuremberg trials, senior OKW officers Wilhem Keitel (Chief of Armed Forces High Command) and Alfred Jodl (Acting Chief of the General Staff) argued that the Wehrmacht hadn't had time to prepare for the influx of so many prisoners, but those prisoners' tragic fate was also a consequence of the aforementioned systematic exploitation of all Soviet food supplies, the brutal warfare and the prevailing derogatory



attitude towards Slavic *untermenschen* (subhumans) among German commanders. “Non-working war prisoners... are supposed to starve”, Quartermaster General Wagner stated bluntly in November 1941. Only those who were assigned duties might “in individual cases” receive food at the expense of the German army, he added.

Only when labour shortages in the German armaments industries became acute during the winter of 1941-42 did the situation improve slightly for those prisoners of war sent to Germany as forced labour. The authorities realised they needed more food to work, but for many the measures came too late. Millions of civilians were deployed by the military to build roads, railways and defensive lines. Later, around 2.8 million were also deported to provide more forced labour in Germany, and the army was involved in the rounding up and monitoring of these people. Even as late as 1943 and 1944 during Germany’s retreat, German army units hunted for unemployed men and women in cities and villages to send west to German factories.

**THE INCREASINGLY BRUTAL** battles against Soviet resistance fighters also had dire consequences for the civilian population left behind in large areas – as captured partisans were murdered or deported by army and SS units, towns and villages were often burned to the ground.

The battles were also used as cover for the continuing extermination of Jews. The slogan coined at the Mogilev Conference, a training event for fighting partisans organised by General Max von Schenckendorff, commander of Army Group Centre Rear Area, was, “Where the partisan is,

## “SOVIET SOLDIERS DID NOT RECEIVE EVEN THE MINIMUM SUSTENANCE”

there is the Jew, and where the Jew is, there is the partisan.”

Several Wehrmacht generals would be made to answer for their actions in the East in the war crimes trials following World War II, but despite academics agreeing that the regular army’s participation in Nazi crimes is an established fact, this has not been so readily accepted among the German public.

In 1995, when the Hamburg Institute for Social Research opened an exhibition profiling the Wehrmacht’s role in Nazi war crimes, it provoked a violent response from many Germans. The myth of the “clean” Wehrmacht, which retired generals had enthusiastically spread across West Germany during the Cold War, was still alive and well. For four years, the exhibition travelled around 30 German and Austrian cities, attracting 800,000 visitors. It was both praised and subjected to accusations of falsifications and manipulation, not just from right-wing extremists and rogue history revisionists. The criticism, which also originated in academic circles, became so fierce that a committee of historians was set up to fact-check the photos and texts on display. However, the committee only found some minor factual errors and a revised exhibition was reopened in 2001, running until 2004. The exhibition had a huge impact in the media and can be said to have helped dispel the myth surrounding the German army’s lack of involvement in Nazi war crimes. 🇩🇪

Niclas Sennerteg is a journalist and writer.

**Further reading:**  
**The Eastern Front 1941–1945 – German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare** (2001) by Omer Bartov  
★ **War of Annihilation – Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front 1941** (2005) by Geoffrey P Megargee.



Around two million Soviet prisoners of war died in German camps between the summer of 1941 and the spring of 1942.



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# HITLER'S BLACK GUARD: THE SS

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**Production:** Eva L. Strandmose

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## Licensing and Syndication:

Regina Erak – regina.erak@globalworks.co.uk  
Tel: +44 (0)7753 811622

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# HITLERS BLACK GUARD: THE SS

In 1943, the Italian resistance movement launched an assault against a SS police force in Rome and 50 Germans were killed. The response was swift:

335 Italians were picked at random and executed outside the city.

A bloody trail followed the SS – not least among its military wing, the Waffen-SS – on the battlefields from Normandy to the Caucasus. The organisation gained a reputation for being one of history's most brutal, responsible for countless massacres of both civilians and prisoners of war.

